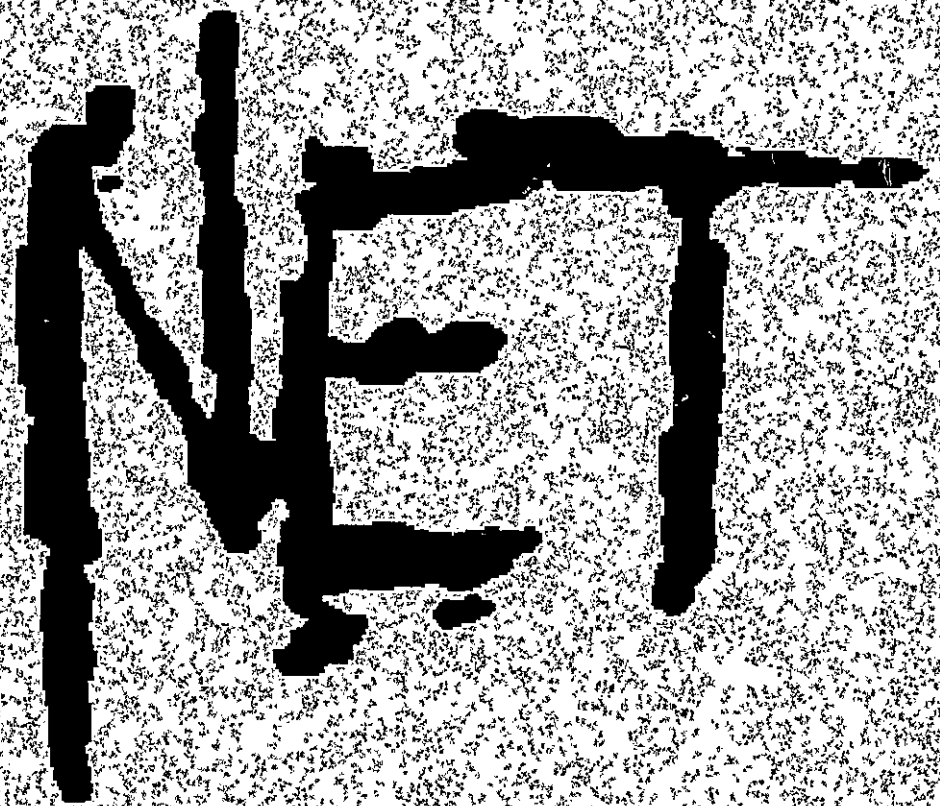
InterKnight Press Publications

FOREVER



Tales from FORKNI-L and FKFIC-L

Issue #3

InterKnight Press Publications

FOREVER

Tales from FORKNI–L and FKFIC–L
Issue #3

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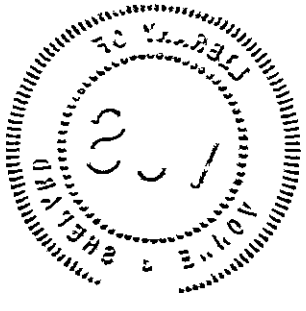

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Editor's Introduction

by Valery King and Karin Welss

Hello again, everybody, and welcome to the third issue of our "electronic zine on paper," *Forever Net.* I don't need to explain about the Internet list again, do I? However, we have included instructions for joining the email list(s) at the end of this introduction, just in case you missed it before.

Originally, we had planned to have this issue out in the summer, before the new episodes of *Forever Knight* started to air (omigod, NEW EPISODES! I can hardly believe it!). Some of the writers were a trifle worried that maybe their stories would no longer work into the canon of the next season--most of the fiction contained here was written and posted to the FKFIC-L list more than five months ago. But I have to tell you, writers and readers alike, that as of this writing I have seen five of the new episodes and you have nothing to be worried about. The talented group of people whose work is represented here understand FK very well, because I can think of nothing that goes against any newly-established canon.

See, I *told* everyone that these writers were gifted! Good job, gang.

We have our usual mix of drama, humor, pathos, romance, and the just plain quirky. Barbara Reid is back with another funny Alma short story, "It's In the Cards." Barb first brought this vampire party-girl to life in her story "Breathers" (FN #1). Alma also makes an appearance in Susan M. Garrett's novella, "A Lamentation, For Strings." Who's Alma, you ask? Watch the first season episode, "For I Have Sinned." Alma is the blonde vampire attempting to snack on Schanke in the back room of the Raven. Only one more reference is made to her in the series, in a scene cut by CBS but shown in Canada: Janette visits the station house in the final episode of the first season, "Love You To Death" and mentions that Alma did the redecorating at the Raven. And that is the extent of Alma's appearances in the series. About two minutes, tops. Isn't it delightful what little things fan writers will latch onto and make their own? Alma is now a firmly established character in FK fanfic.

Other old friends are on hand in this issue. Pamela Rush has given us a sequel to her hilarious "Sleep of the Undead" (FN #2). She subtitles this one, "Caught in Your Knightie? " but around the list it was affectionately dubbed "This Old Loft." Karin Welss is also back in this issue ("Say Goodbye to the Light", FN #1; "Heart of Darkness" FN #2) with her turn on the Joan of Arc episode in "Ashes to Ashes." And the aforementioned Susan Garrett ("All That's Best of Dark and Bright," FN #2) has two more stories in this issue in addition to "Lamentation": "And Memories, Like Diamonds, Shine" and the amusing "A Novel Idea."

But there are new friends here as well. Lizbeth Marcs has written a little philosophical dialogue that takes place in a confessional; Teleri Beaty gives us a crackerjack police procedural, vampire-style, that's also sad and touching; Sandra Gray has penned the evocatively-titled "A Lust for Blood"; and Rebecca Rauscher explores a "what-if" situation for Nick, Nat and Janette.

And as a special bonus...

The first round-robin story on the list ("A Thirst For Vengeance," FN #2) went so well that we tried it again. Many hands created this exciting story in a somewhat different kind of collaboration--the writers went at their sections independently, building on previous chapters, and it is something of a miracle it has such a real and delightful plot. All participants are to be congratulated on their ingenuity and creativity. I knew you could do it!

Thanks are due every fan who wrote to CBS/TriStar/Columbia/Paragon in support of the show. A letter from producer/creator James Parriott assured us that, if it weren't for the overwhelming fan support, *Forever Knight* would never have been revived. I have a suggestion to pass along: write a letter to your local station that's showing *Forever Knight* and thank them; assure them that there is, indeed, strong fan support of the show and you're grateful to them for broadcasting it.

The more we make our voices heard, the better the chances are that this fine program will continue. And, in fact, the longer FK is produced, the better the chances that fine quality fanfic like this will continue to come our way, too.

Valery King, editor
October 5, 1994

Subscribing to the Internet FORKNI-L and FKFIC-L mailing lists

The FORKNI-L and FKFIC-L mailing lists are maintained by an automatic system on BITNET called the *listserv*. The listserv is a software program that handles tasks such as membership additions, removals, and requests for archived material.

Send subscription requests for FORKNI-L and FKFIC-L to `LISTSERV@PSUVM.PSU.EDU` (on Internet), or `LISTSERV@PSUVM` (on BITNET). When sending email commands to the listserv, leave the subject line of your email message blank, and don't include punctuation, a signature file, or other non-command text in your message. When sending multiple commands in a single mail file, each command must be on a seperate line, with no blank lines between commands.

To subscribe to FORKNI-L, send an email message containing the following command to the listserv:

`SUBSCRIBE FORKNI-L` *`firstname lastname`*

For example, when I subscribed to FORKNI-L, my email message to the listserv contained the following line:

```
SUBSCRIBE FORKNI-L Karin Welss
```

You should receive an automated message from the listserv within 24 hours, confirming your subscription to the list. To post messages to FORKNI-L, email your message to

`FORKNI-L@PSUVM.PSU.EDU`

To post stories to FKFIC-L, email your message to

`FKFIC-L@PSUVM.PSU.EDU`

The subject line of your message should contain a short version of the story's name, and if a multi-part story, the part number.

Karin Welss, Production Editor

And Memories, Like Diamonds, Shine

by Susan M. Garrett

The first sound barely registered in her consciousness -- a loud squeak of metal pushed and pressed aside. Growling under her breath, Janette stared at the three-inch thick printout that rested on the table before her, trying to concentrate. She owed Nicola for his suggestion -- Larry Merlin had done a fantastic job of transferring her inventory records from paper to computer diskette. And, once she was happy with the final totals and results, she'd never have to repeat this odious chore again.

It had started out innocently enough -- a ring, a pendant, a set of earrings. How easy it was to keep a few trinkets in a pouch, then satchel, then small box. But LaCroix had balked at her lugging around that chest of jewelry... how long ago could it have been? Certainly, before Nicola had joined them. So she'd been forced to store her treasures, hiding them in places where mortals would not venture, or trusting them, at last resort, to mortal hands for safekeeping. And that's when she'd started her inventory.

Sighing, Janette lifted the glass of blood mixed with wine to her lips and leaned back in her chair. First tablets, then scrolls of papyrus, then parchment and vellum... so many ways to keep records so that she might have something to test her 'perfect' memory. Pieces acquired, then lost or stored, sold for quick cash when LaCroix tightened his purse strings or when she wanted to buy a present for herself or Nicola -- *everything* was listed. And everything -- descriptions, acquisition, value -- was now in the computer. Everything...

Except for the memories.

That was what kept her from gathering all of her treasure in one place.

This time, the sound was louder. Janette froze in place, then snarled lightly. Placing her glass on the table, she reached for the pack of cigarettes. It was almost dawn -- probably Alma or one of the others had forgotten their keys, although she'd been fairly certain that they'd all returned earlier.

She hesitated, listening intently, but when there was no further sound, she lit the cigarette and took a drag. They'd been careful with her during these last two weeks of inventory, especially after she'd snapped at each of them in turn at least ten times nightly. Nicola had learned long ago to absent himself during these times. Lack of sleep made her cranky. And how could she sleep with those memories so close at hand?

Yes, the objects were gold and silver, stones and gems and pearls, cut or bent or twisted or glossed to a perfect shine -- but they were also a form of history. The memories rested within them. One, two, a handful at a time she could take. But when they were all brought together... the voices whispered in her dreams, screams and laughter rent the air, the scent of summer flowers or garlic or burning flesh might fill her nostrils. At most, she'd taken cat-naps, spending the daylight hours going over the inventory between yawns. When she nodded off, she'd awaken a few minutes later, shaken from sleep by the cries or calls or screams of which her memories were made.

But the inventory *had* to be brought up-to-date, who knew when Merlin might be in town again? If it meant suffering through a sleepless two weeks and leaving the club to the not-so-tender care of Alma

and the others for that time, well, it would be worth it in the long run... at least until she was able to assess the damage they'd done to the clientele and her private stock. The blood and the cigarettes would see her through the last few nights.

Taking another puff of her cigarette, Janette watched the gray smoke curl into the air--then suddenly change direction. There was a draft from somewhere, an open door.

She dropped her cigarette into the ash tray and rose from her seat. Slipping quietly into the back room and the access to the alley, a quiet fury began to rage within her. If one of the fools had left the rear door open again, or Alma had slipped back out for a prolonged farewell from her current lover...

Janette knew he was mortal even before she saw him -- his heartbeat thrummed in her ears, fast and steady. Slipping back behind the door, she watched him for a moment, as he shined his flashlight through the street storage area. He was looking for valuables, no doubt. And what a surprise he would have found if she'd been paying even less attention, and he'd managed to make his way downstairs, where the sleepers waited...

Frowning, she raised a finger to her lips. He was no real danger -- disarming was one of her natural talents. She could easily bolt and lock the door beside her before he could move -- which meant that he'd either leave the way he entered or stay until the police arrived this evening. But when he'd broken into the Raven, he'd invaded her territory. And unwelcome visitors shouldn't be tolerated. It would set a bad example.

So, Janette took a few steps back and began to sing to herself. Not loudly, but something light and sweet and soft -- a club owner returning to her storage area for supplies after a very profitable night. As she expected when she entered the room, he hid himself at her approach. And when she walked over to the box that held the spare coasters, she heard his heartbeat as he stalked her from behind.

A hand came over her mouth. The other held a gun, which was pressed beneath the underside of her chin. For effect, Janette managed a mumbled squawk.

The gun pressed tighter against her skin. "Quiet! Okay? Keep quiet! You do like I say, you won't get hurt, okay?"

Janette nodded, trying desperately not to smile. The thief released his hand from her mouth. She spat lightly -- his hands had been dirty -- then turned to look at him.

Not a bad face. A bit thin. Definitely lacking manners. And nervous. *Very* nervous -- which could work for or against her. She'd have to be careful. The gun wouldn't kill her, but it could certainly put a dent in her profile, at least for a day or so.

Stepping back, he held out his palm. "Earrings! And the pearl pin. Let's go."

Janette removed the earrings and pin quickly, trying to maintain the appearance of a fearful mortal. "Here! Take them! Please, just don't hurt me..."

The last bit stirred up echoes in her memory, but she forced them back, fixing her mind on her situation. It was all play acting and, in her way, she was as good at it as Nicola and LaCroix had ever been -- better in some instances. But then, women were accustomed to pretending, at certain times and certain places.

The thief seemed to accept the role she was playing. His expression grim, he gestured toward the doorway with the barrel of the gun. "Where's the till?"

Janette let her eyes go wide. "There's not a lot there. It was a bad night –"

He took a step closer, the gun held to the side of her face. "I want it. Take me to it. Anybody else around?"

"Not a living soul."

"Good. Like I said, no sudden moves. Just do what I say, okay?"

Janette nodded. He grabbed her arm, pushing her before him, as they moved into the club, then behind the bar. Spying the cash register, he pushed her toward it. "Open it."

Turning the key, Janette unlocked the register and stepped back as the till door sprung open. It hadn't been all that bad a night – the thief's eyes went wide at the sight of the cash. He grabbed at the bills, stuffing everything into the pockets of his jacket, momentarily forgetting her presence. Sighing, she folded her arms and waited for him. If she'd had any idea he was going to take this long, she wouldn't have bothered...

But he finished soon enough. Janette managed to replace her annoyance with a fearful expression. Holding her hands at shoulder height, palms outward she said, "That's it. That's all I have. Just... just don't take the rest of my jewelry. It's mostly fake anyway –"

His eyes lit at her words and he smiled. "Let's see what you got. And... no tricks!"

The muzzle of the gun nearly touched her nose. Staring down the barrel, Janette sighed inwardly – it was a wonder Nicola was still interested in fighting crime, if this was a sample of the average criminal. Pathetic!

Hands still held high, she led him back to her office. With any luck he wouldn't think about the possibility of there being a safe – he'd *never* get it open and then she'd have to kill him, if she planned on getting *any* work done.

At the sight of her small jewelry box open atop the cabinet, she frowned. It had been a foolish move on her part, leaving it there. Oh, she might feel a fondness for some of her vampire charges, but few of them could be trusted with such temptation close to hand. Watching the thief clean out the box, she made a mental note to take more care in future.

His pockets bulging, he turned before she thought he was ready, her mask of fear slipping over her features just in time. "Is that all?" he asked suspiciously.

Inwardly, she smiled – good, he'd gotten greedy. She let her gaze slide to the doorway, then shook her head. The gesture was hesitant.

The thief's eyes gleamed as he walked toward her. "Where's the rest of it?"

"There *isn't* any more! That's all of it!"

Reaching forward, he grabbed her arm. "Where's the rest of it?"

Janette stared into his eyes, forgetting herself for a moment. He was *such* an amateur! When he drew back, she continued to stare at him, hearing the sound of his heart, beat by beat, pounding in her ears. "It's in the cellar," she said softly. "You know it's in the cellar. If I've got this much up here, there must be so much more, hidden..."

"So much more... in the cellar."

She could have snapped him like a twig, or drained him dry. Instead, she turned her gaze away and let her hand shake in his grip. "Please... don't hurt me."

Again, the phrase brought back echoes, but she crushed them before they could take hold. Instead, she concentrated on emphasizing her fear, on giving the thief the image he needed to see.

"It's in the cellar, isn't it?" he demanded, twisting her arm roughly behind her back. Pushing her ahead of him, they moved toward the door. "There's more down in the cellar, isn't there?"

"Yes," Janette gasped.

The thief continued to push her down the hall, never noticing how she led him past the other stairwell, where he might awaken the sleepers. Dimly, she made a mental note to change her dress later -- she'd have a bruise on that wrist for a few hours and long sleeves would be necessary. Although she, and the current club fashion, preferred sleeveless garments, she'd learned long ago that long-sleeved garments could hide a multitude of sins, both real and imagined, as well as their consequences.

The stairs she took more carefully -- no sense breaking her neck or impaling herself on a broken wooden balustrade -- and he released his grip on her, needing his free hand to keep hold of the handrail. At the bottom, Janette ran a few steps away, but only those few, turning with her hands at shoulder height again. With a hesitant nod, she indicated the door of the strong room.

It was a heavy steel door, set back into the wall. The paneling she usually used to hide it had been set to one side -- she'd had to make more trips back and forth during inventory than she'd cared to count and replacing the soundproofed, brick-backed false wall had become something of an inconvenience. When it was in place, not even the sharpest of vampire eyes or ears would be able to detect the presence of a room within... or any sounds from it. It was her bolt hole, easily sealed from the inside, where she had provisions to last a short siege.

For now, however, it was her treasure chamber. Janette stepped forward almost proudly as he gestured at her with the barrel of the gun, and pulled the door open. Flicking on the electric lights -- it had its own generator -- she moved to one side of the door and let the glow of the gold draw him inside.

Even she had to admit that it was an impressive sight, a collection of jewelry and ornaments and trinkets, spanning a multitude of lifetimes and centuries. When she'd first begun the task and the enormity of it hadn't yet struck her, she'd grouped the jewelry by class -- crowns and scepters in one pile, armlets and bracelets and anklets in another, earrings and ear pieces bordered by bejeweled headdresses, which were beside the necklaces and pendants. But she'd soon tired of that and now the ransom of nations was scattered about in boxes and chests, lying on or beneath tables, hanging from long poles suspended on sawhorses, and anything else she could find that made access easier. In this one place, this one last time, all of her jewelry was gathered together. This was her existence, her history. And, with so many pieces assembled, it had a life of its own.

But the thief didn't know that. Nor did he care. His eyes were so wide and glowing with the shine of golden greed that she almost believed he could be a vampire. But no vampire heart would beat so quickly.

Abandoning the pretense of being the helpless victim, she walked over to a circlet and placed it lightly over her hair. "This belonged to a princess," she announced, like a tour guide. "Frankish, I think. It was her wedding night. She didn't live long enough to consummate her vows." Giving him a

pretty curtsey and removing the circlet, she walked past a table upon which were piled pins of all shapes and sizes. They whispered their stories, their histories, as she passed.

Plucking out one in particular, she held it out to him. "And this belonged to a Grand Duchess. She thought to bribe me into saving her life." Tossing it back on the pile, she whirled away. "She would have been better if I'd let her die. I told her that no one would believe her, believe who she was. And, after I was through with her, she, herself, was never quite sure. A bit of mischief, but I was bored. There was no blood in the peasants and they'd killed all the aristocracy."

Item by item, Janette moved through the room, forgetting his presence. It was all too much to ignore. The whispers were quiet at first -- a spare echo here and there -- but soon they bit and clawed at her, each vying for her attention. The memories gnawed at her senses, gathering together to form great, cacophonous shouts that blistered her mind like the most casual beam of daylight might burn her skin. Turning, moving this way and that, she walked, then ran through the makeshift aisles, leaping over piles of earrings and necklaces, and bracelets, looking for an escape from time and the weight of the centuries.

Only at the door could she find respite, where she'd been clever enough to leave herself a clear space, where the cold cement was free of the refuse of gold and stones and images and sounds. Janette leaned against the sill of the door and took a deep breath. She closed her eyes and concentrated, blocking out the ancient cries and calls and screeches of history. And, when she'd finally cleared her mind, she turned.

The thief had not been so lucky. She was sensitive to these things -- it was *her* history, after all -- but she also had defenses from this perfect memory. His mortal mind had no shield against the centuries of terror and joy and horror. He'd followed her into the room, had paused at a table covered with piles of crowns and necklaces, and been overwhelmed. If he'd made a sound, she hadn't heard him cry out -- her senses had been too overcome -- but he was crouched on the floor, hands over his ears, eyes closed and mouth open in a silent scream.

The gun was lying on the floor. Carefully picking her way among the jewelry, she lifted it in her hands and held it to his forehead. It would be a mercy to take his life. His reason was gone and would not soon return, if ever.

Wearing a sharp smile, she lifted the gun to her lips and blew away invisible smoke from the muzzle. She wasn't particularly good at mercy. It was one talent she'd never acquired and never cared to. The gun could be given to Nicola -- she'd concoct a story of having taken it from a rowdy patron, which he'd believe readily enough.

But there was one more task before her. Backing away toward the door, Janette's smile faded. "I know you feel neglected and I'll soon care for you, as I've always done," she whispered, to the jewels and memories that gleamed in the darkness. "But for now, take him. He's my gift to you. Take him... and let me rest. The sooner this is over, the sooner you'll go back to your places, I promise you. But I need rest. I need... silence."

The echoes of memories that continued to wash over her lessened as she spoke, the waves crashing and drenching her mind becoming no more than a light mist. Janette paused at the doorway, looking back into the room. "Take your time with him, my loves. You have the day. Give me as much -- the day, for his life. I'll be back at sunset. You know I will. You know I keep my promises."

Janette expected no answer and received none, save that the hurricane of memory that had battered at her defenses for the past two weeks had fallen to less than a gentle breeze. Feeling as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders, she closed the heavy metal door, then replaced the paneling -- he might start screaming at any time and she had no desire to waken the sleepers in the chamber

beyond. They, too, would appreciate a day free of the ceaseless, formless whispers. Though she'd hardly tell them how or why it was accomplished. A girl had to have some secrets, after all.

For a moment, Janette paused at the door, wondering if she'd be better served by continuing her inventory. A yawn settled the inner argument. Smiling sleepily, she ascended the stairway, heading for the rear room and the alley entrance -- there was only the broken door to make fast. The rest could be handled after sunset, when she was refreshed and ready to finish the project.

But for now -- she would head for her resting place. Her memories had found fresher, mortals fields in which to graze this night. And she was assured of a day of rest, a day of peace, and the silent, empty sleep of the dead.

--The End--

Lust for Blood

by Sandra Gray

The stranger stepped from the cool night air into the warmth and murkiness of the Raven nightclub. He extended his hearing beyond the beat of the rock music to focus on the heated beating of the dancers' hearts. Some hearts were beating in time with others – a sure sign that his own kind were there. Good. That meant the club was a good hunting ground.

He pushed through the writhing bodies to a quieter spot, where he turned and scanned the dancers again. Tall and dark, he was dressed entirely in black except for the ruby tie tack in his black silk tie. He fastened his eyes on an attractive brunette dancing on the floor in front of him. Their eyes met and he smiled. She smiled back. He moved closer to her. "Dance?" he asked. She glanced at her companion – a rather punk looking young man.

"Sure," she said and he took her arm. A slower song was starting and he pulled her close. He exerted his powers to keep her gaze locked to his and smiled as her face went blank and her heart slowed to match his rhythm.

"I'm warm. Why don't we step outside?" he asked.

"Okay," said the girl.

Janette, the owner of the Raven, stepped out of the back room and walked to the bar to check on the stock. She smiled at a few of the regular patrons and glanced around to see that things were moving smoothly. Near the door she saw the stranger in black. "Anton," she said. Her bartender came over to her. "Who's the stranger?" He followed her gaze.

"I don't know. Can I get you some of your private stock?"

Janette looked at him and smiled briefly. "No. Maybe later. Right now I want to speak to that man–" She looked back to the door and then all around the club. The stranger and the girl with him were gone. Janette frowned briefly and went back into the back room.

The man in black kept his arm around his mesmerized companion as they stepped out into the night air. The street was deserted, but he looked for a more private spot. An alley next to the club offered the needed darkness and seclusion. He took the girl behind a trash dumpster.

Once there, his courteous manner changed. He released his hold over his companion, who blinked and said, "What are we doing in the alley?" He watched the fear leap into her face as he opened his mouth and thrilled to the wild fear beating in her heart. She tried to pull away but he tightened his grip on her and pulled her closer. She screamed as his fangs sank into her throat.

Inside the Raven, Janette's sensitive ears heard the scream. It seemed to come from the alley behind the club. Hesitantly, she walked over to the back entrance and opened the door.

The alley was dark and there was no movement. But Janette felt uneasy. She walked partway out into the alley. She saw high heels sticking out from behind the trash dumpster. Alarmed, she rushed over.

A girl lay on the ground beside the dumpster, her eyes open and fear etched across her features. There was no heart beat coming from her, but the wound in her throat oozing blood was testament to her fate. She'd been murdered – by a vampire.

* * *

Nicholas Knight awoke from sleep in a cold sweat – for once, not remembering a dream. In his advanced age, was he finally losing some of the memories that haunted him? After all, it was almost eight hundred years and if there was one thing that made immortality increasingly unappealing, it was immortal memory.

He ran his hand through his wavy blonde hair, which of course had changed little over the years except in fashion. His body was still a fit and trim twenty-nine, his face little lined and handsome but, perhaps to some, having a curiously innocent expression. Curious. Since Nicholas Knight was – and continued to be – a vampire.

Nick staggered down from the second floor of his converted warehouse apartment to the refrigerator. He took out a bottle of blood and pulled out the cork with his teeth. The cold liquid ran into his throat, but did not satisfy. He drank on automatically, hoping to still the restlessness and dissatisfaction he felt. Almost the whole bottle later he finally put it aside in disgust. Clearly he could hear Natalie say, "It's the blood that keeps you from coming over, Nick." He pictured her large, dark eyes and long white neck...

Then pushed the thought away. He had to get ready for work, although he didn't really feel like it. Oh well, maybe there would be an interesting case tonight.

Nick worked for the Toronto Metro Police, 27th Precinct, as a homicide detective, and had done so for the past two years. Natalie Lambert, the county coroner, had helped him to get the job. He thought back to their first meeting in her morgue. He had been temporarily dead, the victim of a pipe bomb as he was trying to stop a gang robbery. He remembered how the strain of healing his severe wounds had almost made him decide to attack her. But fortunately she had had fresh blood on hand and he had been able to spare her. Since then, Natalie had helped him – first with the job, then with his continuing efforts to become mortal again. She was a doctor and perhaps twentieth-century science *could* be the key to escaping his affliction, as she believed.

Nick dressed in blue jeans, white shirt, and black leather jacket. He had to get going; his partner tonight – Don Schanke – would be waiting for him. He climbed behind the wheel of his green 1962 Cadillac convertible. He found his mind wandering as he drove to police headquarters and tried to shake off his mental lassitude. He glanced at his watch. 8:45. Better step on it.

"Hey, Nick," said Schanke, looking up from his desk as Nick entered. A frown crossed his face. "You look like death warmed over."

"I – haven't been sleeping well," said Nick.

"Yeah? Anybody I know?" Schanke winked.

Nick smiled wryly. "Who has time for dating, Schanke?"

"Aw, c'mon Nick, you can't tell me that with your looks–"

Fortunately, Nick was saved from further discussion of his love life by Sergeant Morris. "Hey, Knight, Schanke! Duty time."

Nick and Schanke walked over to his desk. "What is it?" asked Nick.

"Murder, next to the Raven night club."

"The Raven," said Nick. He frowned thoughtfully.

"Well, let's not stand here, Knight," said Schanke. "Let's roll."

The Raven was a night spot in one of the tougher sections of town. A standard police cruiser was already pulled up outside when Nick arrived. The uniforms were in the alley and next to the club and had cordoned it off. Janette was standing next to one of them, as were a couple of pedestrians.

She turned as she heard Nick's car and came toward him. Nick's heart beat a little faster at her distress, because he knew police snooping was something she tried to avoid. Her club, the Raven, had in part a "special" clientele. It catered to vampires.

Her large eyes were pleading silently as she spoke low to him. "Nick. You have to keep the club out of this." He took her arms, inhaling an enchanting fragrance from her dark hair.

"I'll do what I can, Janette." Then he released her and approached the body.

The victim was a woman of about twenty-five with dark hair, dressed for a night on the club circuit. His partner was already bent beside her. As Schanke turned her head further to the side, Nick was dismayed by the sight of two puncture wounds in her throat -- oozing blood that dripped in a puddle on the pavement. The scent of it assailed his nostrils and he suddenly found himself trembling. He tried to focus on his job and turned his gaze to Schanke, who was examining her purse. "Who is she?" He would wonder later why her body upset him so.

"Huh?" said Schanke. "Oh, Martha Vicars, age 26, local resident. She's got money, credit cards, so robbery's probably not a motive." He stood up, frowning. "Hey pal, you don't look so good. Not that I don't sympathize." He looked at the body again. "Pretty gruesome way to go."

"Yeah," said Nick shortly. Silently cursing his body's reactions to the dead woman, he stepped away from her. "You finish up here while I check out the witnesses." Then he turned his back on the crime scene and approached Janette. In a low voice he said, "Do you know who's responsible for this?"

She shook her head and said in the same tone, "I have no idea. But you can be sure, Nicolah, that it was no one from the club. No one's that stupid."

"How can you say that?" he said with unintended loudness. He dropped his voice again. "How can you say that when you can see what happened to her?" Janette looked down. "Who found the body?" She looked back at him.

"I did. But I can't get involved."

"You are involved, Janette."

"You can't think I had anything to do with this."

Nick sighed. "No. No, I know you didn't. But--" he lowered his voice to a whisper, "but *someone* did." An ambulance had arrived and he took the opportunity of the attendants coming through to move the body to draw Janette further away from the crowd and into the street near his car.

"We can handle this, Nick."

Nick knew what she meant. The cadre of vampires in the Raven would search out such a renegade vampire and he – or she – would be made to pay for such folly as an open kill. That was something, however, that he couldn't put in a police report.

"I know," he said. "But I have a job to do, Janette. I'll do what I can to keep you and the Raven out of it, but I can't make guarantees."

"I know." Janette frowned and touched his cheek. "You look pale, Nicolah."

He pulled back from her. "I'm fine," he said, although he still wasn't quite recovered from the odd reaction he'd had to the murder victim. To cover it and focus, he began asking more questions. "Have you got *any* idea what's happened here?"

"No," said Janette. "I heard a scream, came out, and found her there. No one else was around. Then some pedestrians came by." Which explained the police. "But ..."

"But?"

"There was a stranger in the club. I'd never seen him before."

"One of – us?"

Janette nodded. "In fact, he was dancing with her."

"What did he look like?"

"I only got a brief glimpse of him. He was tall and dark, and dressed all in black. I was going to find out more about him – tell him the club's rules. But I was distracted and when I looked for him again, he was gone."

"Can you tell me anything else about him? Maybe a facial description?"

"No, I only saw him for a moment."

"What about Anton? Do you think he noticed him?"

"I don't know. You can ask him."

Forensics and photographers were now on the crime scene. "Okay, Janette. Don't worry. We'll find out who did this."

"*We* certainly will. The Raven is a haven for our kind, Nicholas. I won't have it jeopardized." She turned and went back into the club.

The ambulance had loaded its burden for transport to the morgue and was pulling away. Relieved, Nick walked back over to the crime scene. "Find anything, Schanke?"

"Naw." Nick looked around. There didn't seem to be any physical clues of note to be found. "What about witnesses?"

"Janette found the body. She didn't see anyone else."

"Well, let's ask around inside."

"I'll do that."

"But, Nick--"

"I'm known here, Schanke. Wait in the car. I shouldn't be long." Schanke grumbled under his breath and headed for Nick's car.

In the Raven, Anton wasn't any more helpful than Janette. He'd been busy serving drinks. No one else had seemed to notice anything either – or perhaps didn't want to speak. The mortals didn't trust cops and the vampires weren't sure if they could trust *him*, Nick suspected.

Nick went back out to his car and got in it. "Well?" said Schanke.

"The victim was seen in the club – with a tall, dark stranger dressed in black."

"Oh, great description. Is that all you found out?"

"Yeah. But I left my number at the bar."

Schanke hesitated for a moment, then said, "I hope I don't detect any desire to keep the Raven out of this case."

"Don't be ridiculous, Schanke," said Nick lightly.

"Well, I know Janette is a –*friend* of yours."

"What do you mean by that?" said Nick, unable and maybe unwilling to keep the threat out of his voice.

Schanke was contrite. "Nothing, old buddy," he said, smiling uncertainly.

"Good. Let's get to the morgue and see what Natalie has to say." They rode in silence, Nick's thoughts in a turmoil. How was he going to keep Janette and her circle out of this mess? If he laid too low on the case, Schanke might suspect something. He might suspect something already.

Don Schanke, after all, was a good cop. Forty-ish, dark, slightly overweight, and balding, his open and friendly manner belied a keen deductive mind. They were usually teamed together when Schanke worked the night shift. But his partner did have his blind spots. He had not, for instance, figured out that Nick was a vampire. He, along with his other comrades on the force, bought the fiction of Nick's allergy to the sun. It didn't hurt to have Nat's support in that respect, either. Still, he must be careful.

Natalie was already examining the body when they arrived at the morgue. Her large, dark eyes met Nick's eyes with worry as he entered. Briefly he wondered at the similar physical appearance of Natalie and Janette. Both looked about thirty, both large-eyed, dark-haired beauties. But Janette, of course, was far older. Nick pulled his mind back to the matters at hand. "How's it going, Nat?" he asked, avoiding looking at the body.

She stared at him. "Well, the apparent cause of death is a – wound – in her throat. Severed the artery. I suspect a – great loss of blood."

"Wasn't much in the alley," said Schanke.

"Oh?" she asked, her brows rising. But her eyes did not leave Nick's. "Where was she found?"

"In the alley next to the Raven night club," said Nick. He looked away from her and at his partner. "Schanke, why don't you take my car and go back to the station and start on the preliminary paperwork? I'll wait here for Nat's report." He held out his car keys.

"Aw, Nick, why do you always sack me with the boring crap?"

"C'mon, you know you're better at that stuff than me." Schanke still hesitated. "Please." Nick smiled.

Schanke sighed and took the keys. "All right. But *you* have to do the legwork on this one, buddy." He paused, then added, "What am I *saying*? All that Grade A action! I take it back, Nick!"

"Get going, Schanke."

"Okay, okay," he grumbled. Then he left.

Nick turned back to Natalie. "Is this what I think it is?" she asked. Nick glanced briefly at the body; it still shook him, but not as badly. He looked again at the coroner.

"I'm afraid so, Nat."

"But who—"

"I don't know. Neither does Janette. We suspect a renegade."

"Renegade?" asked Natalie.

"Janette noticed a strange vampire in the club. Apparently he wasn't there long enough to be made aware of the rules."

"Rules?"

"It's not important." He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "What's important is to find the murderer -- *without* involving the police."

"That's not going to be easy, is it?"

"No." At that moment Nick wished he was on vacation. He had tried to take one a few weeks ago, but Captain Stonetree had called him in to go undercover on a case where addicts in a Twelve Step program were being murdered. Of course, when Stonetree asked him if he had any bad habits, Nick hadn't mentioned his addiction to blood. Actually, the program *had* helped him for a while, until he was disillusioned and fell off the wagon, so to speak. The girl on the table could have just as easily been killed by him *then*. If Nat hadn't talked to him, made him see light again. He frowned.

"Nick?" said Natalie. "Is something wrong? You look pale."

He sighed again. "It's just the job." Wasn't it? The stress *had* been getting to him; that's why he'd tried to take a vacation. Maybe he'd take one after this mess with Janette was cleared up. Natalie touched his arm.

"Don't let this case get to you, Nick."

He smiled wryly. "Get me your medical report as soon as you can." She nodded and he left the room.

Schanke was leaving Stonetree's office when he got back to the station. "Nat's report done already?" he asked in disbelief and almost – fear.

Nick hesitated. "No. She figured it was going to take a while, so I decided to come back here."

"Oh." Schanke seemed nervous. Nick wondered why.

"Nick!" came Captain Stonetree's voice. Nick turned to see his superior standing at his office door. "Can I see you for a minute?"

"Sure, Cap'n," said Nick lightly. But he suddenly got a bad feeling. He looked at Schanke, who sat and started to look through paperwork on his desk.

Stonetree closed the door behind him and Nick and said, "Sit down, Nick."

"Captain, is this necessary? I'm right in the middle of a case–"

"I know. The case is what I wanted to talk to you about." Stonetree sat down. He was a huge bear of a man with a slow, deliberate way of talking. Nick sat in the chair opposite him and waited. "Schanke just filled me in on the murder outside the Raven." Nick waited, not knowing what to say. "He says you're friends with the owner, Janette–" He consulted a paper in front of him on which he'd made notes.

"What's the point, Captain?" Nick interrupted.

Stonetree leaned back in his chair, his hands behind his head, and studied his detective. "How close are you to this woman?"

"We're – friends. I go to the club once in a while. She's helped with information on other cases I've worked on."

"Mmm – hmm. Schanke isn't sure you can be objective about this case."

Nick stood up, angry. "Schanke's wrong!"

"I don't know, Nick. You seem personally involved to me."

Nick knew that he had to somehow convince his captain to let him stay on the case. He had to be in a position to protect Janette and her companions from discovery. "Captain, please. Don't take me off the case." He began to pace the room. He knew it was a mistake, but he couldn't seem to stop himself.

Stonetree watched him silently for a minute. "I'm sorry, Nick. I can't let you do it," he said. Before Nick could say anything more, he continued, "I'm relieving you of duty."

Nick stopped in his tracks. "You're what?"

"Seems to me you didn't get to finish your vacation. I'm giving you time off."

"But, Captain, I don't want time off."

"You *need* time off," said Stonetree. "I can see it. You know it."

"No, Captain–"

"The stress gets to all of us, Knight – even you. And you look... tired."

Nick sighed. "I'm not going to be able to change your mind, am I?"

"Nope. Take two weeks off. Relax. Schanke can handle your load while you're gone." Nick grimly turned to go. "And Nick–" He looked again at his captain. "I expect you to not work on any cases while you're off duty. Understood?"

Nick pressed his lips together, then said, "Understood, Captain."

"Good. Go home. Enjoy yourself."

Striving to maintain calm, Nick said, "I'll try, Captain." Stonetree picked up some paperwork on his desk. Nick took his action as a sign that he was finally dismissed.

Once out of Stonetree's office, Nick's eyes fastened on Schanke at his desk, apparently hard at work on his preliminary report. Nick approached him. "Why did you go to Stonetree, Schanke?"

Schanke at least had the good grace to look cowed. "Hey, nothing personal–"

"The hell it wasn't!" Nick muttered in a low voice. "Well, the case is all yours now, *buddy*. I'm out of here."

"Out of here?"

"Stonetree gave me two weeks vacation. So you're on your own. Hope you enjoy it."

"Hey, Nick–" Schanke started, but Nick was already headed for the door.

Nick stopped for a moment outside and let the cool air cool his temper somewhat. Due to Schanke's interference, he would now have to find the renegade vampire on his own – which could be to his advantage. But he would be hampered in finding out how close the police might get to Janette's secret.

Nick got in the Caddy and drove home. Truth be told, he *was* glad to be off for a while. Especially since he'd turned so sensitive with this case. He just wished it wasn't at this particular time – when Janette needed him. He got a bottle of blood from the refrigerator and poured a glass. But the drink was unsatisfying.

He decided to go to the Raven. Since he was no longer on the murder case, no one could stop him. Besides, Janette needed to know what was happening.

The Raven was busy despite the lateness of the hour. But since so many of its patrons were denizens of the night, that was to be expected. Apparently the murder in the alley had had no marked effect on business. The hard rock music throbbed into his skull and the scent of the humans around him was almost intoxicating.

Janette was leaning on the bar, smiling at the bartender. But when she turned and saw Nick, she immediately became serious. He approached her.

"Nicola," she said. "Have you found out something already?"

"No," he said. "No, I've been pulled off the case."

"What?"

Nick raised his eyebrows. "Seems the Captain's worried about my objectivity. Since we're -- friends."

"I see. What does that mean now?"

"It means you'll probably have Schanke poking his nose around."

"Is that going to be a problem?"

"I don't think so. Not if you keep me posted. I'll try to keep your secret from being found out, you know that." Perhaps he could use Nat to keep tabs on the investigation.

"But if you're assigned another case--"

"I won't be." She raised her eyebrows. "Stonetree put me on vacation for two weeks."

"I see. That's why you're here."

"It's -- part of the reason." The sound and the lights of the club were beginning to irritate him. "Listen, Janette, can we go in the back? I'm... not feeling like a party right now."

"You know you are always welcome, Nicky." They went into the back of the club, to Janette's private rooms. "But really, darling, you *do* look dreadful. I can see why Stonetree gave you a vacation. Can I get you a... drink?"

"No, no I'm fine," said Nick, dropping onto a couch. He really *did* feel unwell, but he had no idea why.

"Are you sure? When did you last feed?" asked Janette, sitting beside him.

"Not long ago."

"What was it? Cow's blood? Or sheep's? Really, Nicky, why don't you have some of my private stock?" She smiled seductively.

"You know how I feel about human blood."

Janette sighed. "Suit yourself." She paused, then continued, "You know, you could have just called me."

Nick looked at Janette's dark hair; it reminded him of Natalie. Janette's eyes were large too, but not as dark. "I know. But I felt the need for... companionship."

"Oh?" she said, her smile widening. She ran a finger up his arm to his neck and caressed him there lightly. Nick felt his temperature rise and his blood started to pound. Janette leaned closer and caressed his cheek with her own, her breath coming ragged in his ear. She began to ease off his coat.

Their eyes met. Nick kissed her, feeling the mental pleasure in her response. Drawing her close, he kissed her more deeply and heard her heart begin to pound in rhythm with his. Surely this was what he needed. He stayed too often away from his own kind, since most of them believed that humans were meant to be their prey -- not their companions. And even though this woman had led him as a human to the one who had made him what he now was, Nick could not forget the years they had

spent in each other's company, many of them quite pleasant. She was then, and continued to be, a temptress.

And her love, although dangerous, was nothing if not honest. He kissed her cheeks, her neck, feeling the vampire in him rising to the fore and not fighting it. When their eyes met again, he knew his were just as yellow as hers. She opened her mouth, baring her fangs. His growl was met by one of hers as he lowered his mouth and pierced her throat. Their blood sang together when she pierced him and long withheld thoughts and memories flowed between them as they drank of each other. He was hardly aware when she pushed him down and mounted him. He was drunk on the taste of her – the taste that was almost human. Suddenly afraid, he released her.

It took a moment for Janette to recover from Nick's abrupt separation from her. She was still straddling him and already his passion for her was draining away. His blood stained her lips but still she breathed in a husky voice, "Nicky. Nicky, what is it?"

Nick pushed her away from him and refastened his clothes. He still felt upset and, worse, was trembling. "I – I don't know," he admitted. "I'm sorry, Janette. I guess I shouldn't have come here."

Janette's eyes had finally returned to their normal color. She wiped her lips with the back of her hand. He could see she was irritated. And he couldn't blame her, since he knew she had been left unsatisfied. But then, so was he. "No, you shouldn't have," she said. "Not if you didn't really want me." Nick said nothing, not able to explain it himself. "Perhaps it's Natalie Lambert you want, hmm?"

"No!" Nick said, standing. He picked up his coat. "I – I'm sorry, Janette. I thought – I... I have to go now." He pulled on his coat and turned to leave.

"Go then! And don't come back!" Sighing, Nick moved back out into the club. Just as he reached the exit, he heard Janette yell, "Wait, Nick! I'm sorry! Nick!"

Then he was out in the night and up into the sky. Janette didn't follow. He soared over the city. The blood he'd shared from Janette filled his veins with power and speed. He hadn't felt so alive in a long time. But when he landed on the street outside his building some time later, the same vague feeling of dissatisfaction filled him. He went inside his apartment.

Nick touched his mouth. Janette's blood was sticky there. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his mouth and chin. Then he went to the refrigerator and poured himself a drink. And sat and looked at it.

* * *

Susan Andrews stepped out of Jilly's strip club. The night was cold and dark; she pulled the collar of her coat up closer around her throat.

Tips had been good and the grabbers low. If only all her nights stripping could be like tonight. She started down the street to the parking garage.

One of her least favorite things to do was walk to her car after the club closed. She was always wary of trouble. Was that the sound of footsteps behind her? She stopped and listened, hearing nothing.

Only one more block to go. But it was along one of the darkest sections of the street. The footsteps sounded behind her again. She turned, but nothing was there. The streets were deserted.

She turned back around to finish the walk to her car – only to see a man in front of her. She let out a cry of alarm.

The stranger was clad in black except for a red gem of some kind holding his tie. He smiled. "I'm sorry. Did I frighten you?" His voice was deep and musical, his eyes dark and – compelling.

Susan smiled hesitantly. "Yes, you did rather," she said.

"It's late to be on the streets," said the man. "Could be – dangerous."

"It's one of the pitfalls of being a working girl," said Susan. Then she hastened to add, "That is, I'm not a hooker. I'm a stripper – at Jilly's." Now why had she said something so stupid to a man she didn't know?

"I see. Can I escort you home?"

"Oh, no, that's all right," said Susan quickly, uneasy and wanting to be away from the stranger. She started to walk away from him, but heard him behind her... following.

Susan wondered what she could say to discourage the stranger, charming though he seemed to be. Suddenly his hand was on her arm – in a tight grip. He was pulling her into the darkness of a nearby alley. Terrified, she screamed, "Let me go!"

And was petrified. The man's eyes had turned from dark to an animal yellow and an animal growl escaped his lips. Then his mouth opened – exposing two long *fangs* where his eye teeth should have been. She screamed. Then screamed again as his fangs pierced her throat.

* * *

Nick came awake with a start to the sound of his answering machine. He blinked and tried to clear his head. "Yeah, Nick Knight. I'm either in bed or incommunicado so if you want to leave your name and number, go ahead. BEEP!"

"Nick?" came Natalie's voice. "I know you're resting, but I found a great old movie on video and wondered if you'd like to watch it with me. Call me later, okay?"

Nick smiled. Natalie was a sucker for old movies. He wondered what she'd found this time. He walked downstairs and dialed her number. "Nat? It's Nick."

"Oh hi, Nick. Did I wake you?"

"Yeah, but that's okay. So what's this movie you found?"

"It's a surprise. Can you come over tonight and watch it with me?"

Nick hesitated, then said, "Sure. What time?"

"About nine?"

"I'll be there. Should I bring anything?"

"Just yourself." She paused before adding, "Enjoying your vacation?" So she had heard about it already.

"Such as it is."

Natalie hesitated. Then she said, "I'm sure Schanke only did what he thought was right."

"I don't want to discuss it. Maybe it's for the best." He hesitated, then continued, "Nat, I'm -- going to need someone to keep me informed about the investigation. Can I count on your help?"

"Of course, Nick," Natalie replied readily.

"Thanks. So what's the word on the autopsy?"

"It's as I thought. Death was due to loss of blood."

"Anything else?"

"Some skin samples under the nails. I'm still working on the DNA." Natalie sounded upset. Nick frowned.

"What else, Nat?" he said.

"There's -- been another murder, Nick. Same M.O. A stripper by the name of Susan Andrews. A garbage collector found her body in an alley near Jilly's strip club this morning." Nick's heart sank. Two victims in the same night.

"Have you been able to pinpoint the time of death?"

"She died somewhere between two and four a.m."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing so far."

"Okay. Keep me posted. And don't mention anything of what you've told me to Schanke."

"I won't." She paused and added, "You've got to find out who's doing this, Nick. If you could have seen the fear on Susan Andrews' face -- He's evil. Well, see you later, okay?"

"Yeah. 'Bye, Nat."

"'Bye."

Nick hung up the phone. And was suddenly cast back into his memories.

* * *

LaCroix was sitting by the fireplace in the French chateau they had rented for this summer in 1501. He was urging out a tune on his rebec while staring into the flames. Nick studied him, wondering, and finally gave voice to his thoughts.

"Who made you a vampire, LaCroix?"

LaCroix, startled, stopped playing his rebec. He turned his cold eyes on Nick and smiled. The flames from the fire shone brilliantly off his platinum blonde hair. "Why do you want to know, Nicholas?"

Nick looked down, as always unsure of whether LaCroix's amusement would turn cruel in the end. But he pressed forward with his query. "I just wondered. But if you don't want to talk about it—" Why was he never sure of where he stood with LaCroix?

LaCroix put down the rebec and stood. He placed an arm on the mantel and pursed his lips. "I suppose I could tell you. He was your grandfather, so to speak." The thought amused him into an open laugh. "Just as you are my son, Nicholas." He laughed again. "An amusing concept, no?"

Nick did not reply. He frowned, remembering the night that LaCroix had taken his very soul as well as his life's blood – had seduced him into forsaking his humanity for the promise of immortality. Nick had not understood him then and had understood little more in the intervening years they had spent together.

LaCroix became serious. He drew very close to Nick.

"You look disturbed, Nicholas. Does it distress you to know that there is someone on this earth more evil than I?"

* * *

Nick came back to reality. He staggered out to the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of blood. He poured a glass, his hand shaking slightly. This vampire case was becoming more ugly by the minute. Ugly indeed. Janette needed to know of the new development.

He called her. Her voice sounded sleepy, which was expected as they spent most of their daylight hours in that fashion. When she heard his news, she became more alert and serious. She assured him that she would inform the rest of the Raven's "patrons" and they would begin assisting him in the search for the renegade. "After all," she said, "a vampire scare would definitely be bad for business."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Nick had to smile. "Yeah," he said. "Keep me posted on any developments at your end."

"I will," she said. "And Nick, about last night -- well, don't let anything I said keep you away, all right?"

Nick smiled wryly. "I'm – the one who should be apologizing -- not you. But I'm glad to know we're still – friends."

"Forever, Nicolah." He listened as she yawned. "But right now, I'm going back to sleep. Goodnight, Nicky."

"Goodnight, Janette." He hung up the phone. Then he drained his glass of blood and sat on the couch to think.

The rest of the day seemed to drag by. Nick felt between the Devil and a hard place -- his job had been causing stress, but his forced vacation seemed to be causing *more* stress, if that was possible. It was probably because of the murders and Schanke getting him pulled off the murder case. Natalie could help, but she *was* only the coroner. She might not be privy to all the developments in the police

investigation. And Nick couldn't seem to get his own thoughts focused on the problem of finding the murderer before the police did.

Perhaps the distraction of Natalie and her movie would help. Would clear his mind so he could find the renegade vampire.

Nick knocked on Natalie's door promptly at nine. When she opened it, he smiled. Whatever he had expected was dispelled by her appearance. Natalie was clad in a sweat-suit, an apple in her hand. Certainly she was not dressed seductively. But then why had he thought she would be? She smiled broadly and moved aside for him to enter.

Nick held out the two bottles of wine he'd brought – one regular, one his special blend. She took them, but glanced sideways at him when she noticed his own stock. "I thought your vacation was going to be a test of my theory."

Nick closed the door and walked to the window. "I'm not on vacation. Besides it's -- not so easy, Natalie. You know that."

"It's the blood that keeps you from coming over, Nick."

"I don't need a lecture!" he heard himself shout. He looked at her. "I'm – sorry, Nat. I've tried, am -- trying," he lied. The truth was, he felt shakier about his addiction than ever. But he knew better than to tell her that.

Natalie studied him for a moment, then said, "I'm sorry. It must be hard for you right now. Have you found any leads to the – murderer yet?"

"No. Maybe I *am* too close to the case. What about you? Have you heard anything new?"

"No. Schanke hasn't got any leads as far as I know."

"Hmm," he said. "So what's on the show tonight?"

"*Dracula.* 1931, with Bela Lugosi."

Nick groaned with what he hoped sounded like normal humor as Natalie went into the kitchen. "Oh, please, Nat!" She emerged with a bowl of popcorn. "Why do you want to watch that? When you've got me?" He smiled.

She sat on the couch and grinned at him. "I just want to compare notes."

He sighed and sat in the chair next to her. "You're awful, Nat!" he said, almost lightheartedly. Natalie turned down the lights and started the video.

Nick watched *Dracula* with a halfhearted interest. What did movies really know about vampires? Some of the old legends were true, of course, but nothing in this film conveyed the horror of his existence. Bela Lugosi did not even use fangs. But he *did* convey an appropriate reaction/attraction to his victims; Nick found himself studying the woman he attacked intently. The black and white starkness of the film focused her body with clarity – too much clarity. He knew Natalie would find it distasteful, but he went to the refrigerator for his bottle, glad that he had brought it. He felt her eyes on him as he opened it and poured a glass. He took special care to sip slowly. But what he really wanted to do was toss it off and have another.

Nick felt tenser by the second and was glad when the movie was over. Natalie turned up the lights again and with feigned lightheartedness he asked, "Well? Any insights, Doc?"

Natalie frowned at him. "What's wrong, Nick?"

He got up and paced to the window. "Nothing's wrong, Nat. Why?"

She came to stand beside him. "You seem – wound up, tense. Is it the case? Or – the movie?"

"That piece of drivel? It's as far from a *real* vampire's existence as it can be." He raised his glass to his lips, only to find it empty. Natalie's hand touched his forehead -- as if to feel his temperature. He could hear her heart beating and felt his own trying to synchronize with it. He stepped back from her.

Too quickly, it seemed, because Natalie only frowned deeper and reached for him again. "Don't, Nat," he said, stepping further away from her. He needed a drink and walked to the kitchen for one, forgetting for the moment that he had left his bottle on the coffee table. He could still hear Natalie's heart pounding, faster now. He closed his eyes, his glass forgotten on the counter. How he had missed that sound, that thrill of fear in the heart of a victim. Somehow he had to block out that sound – that seductive sound.

There was a touch on his arm. Nick whirled around to see Natalie had followed him. An uncertain fear was in her eyes, but also concern. She came closer and put her arms around his waist, laid her head on his chest. Her scent was in his nostrils. And he was powerless to stop her.

What was she thinking? Didn't she realize the danger? Nick felt his arms go around her and tighten. He heard her heartbeat change and felt what he had suspected all along – that she wanted him, that she loved him. It was something he felt for her too. But it must not be! He felt his mouth opening, the fangs extending. No! What had happened before must not happen again!

Somehow he found the strength to push her away. Fear leaped into her eyes and heart as she looked at him; he knew his eyes were yellow and his fangs extended. He had not ached for someone as he did now for Natalie in a long time; his body trembled with it. He had to leave – now – before it was too late. Pushing her aside, Nick leaped for the window. The glass shattered and he rose into the night and away.

* * *

Nick was exhausted when he touched ground in the park, his thoughts heavy. He avoided people and wandered silently alone. The park was almost deserted and he was glad of it. What was wrong with him? He hadn't felt so close to the edge – really close to the edge -- in a long time.

He didn't know how long he had been wandering when his acute hearing picked up the sound of a woman's scream. He looked around him, trying to pierce the surrounding darkness with his night vision, seeking the source of the sound. A more muffled, weaker scream followed the first and he picked up on the direction.

He rose into the night sky and sped off in the direction of the sound. A clearing appeared in some trees and he saw them. A man, tall and dark, had a woman in a close embrace, his head to her throat.

Nick called on all his vampire powers as he dropped into the clearing. Baring his fangs, he growled and leaped for the other vampire.

The stranger raised his head. Blood dripped from his lips and his fangs were still bared. Seeing Nick, he let his prey drop to the ground and, with a growl, stood upright. Nick had only the briefest of moments to study the face of his adversary before the back of the man's hand connected with his jaw.

Nick was thrown backward so forcefully and so quickly he didn't have time to adjust his flight. He landed head first into a large tree trunk. The world spun out of control and, although he tried to fight it, he lost consciousness.

Nick came around a few minutes later with a big headache. The clearing was empty save for the dead woman. He knew she was dead; no sound of heartbeat came from her. Rubbing the pieces of bark out of the back of his head, he struggled up.

Nick remembered that there was a public phone not far away and walked through the trees to find it. He wasn't sure whether to trust his equilibrium by flying. He dialed the station and waited on the path until the uniforms – and Schanke – arrived. He led them to the clearing.

Schanke bent down to examine the body. The woman was young and pretty and looked to be dressed for a night on the town. "So what happened, Nick?"

"I was walking in the park and heard her scream. But by the time I got here, she was already dead."

"Did you see anybody else?"

Nick thought about the other vampire. His face was etched in his mind. But he said, "No. I'm afraid not, Schanke."

Schanke sighed. "Looks like we've definitely got a serial killer hire. One with a real lust for blood."

Lust for blood. He remembered when he had felt that way. Long ago. Or not so long ago. But he said, "Yeah, looks that way. You got any leads?"

"None. And it's a real headache." Nick rubbed the back of his head -- which still hurt – briefly as Schanke started to make an examination of the crime scene. "Hello, what's this?" He bent down and picked up something with his hanky.

"What is it?" asked Nick, drawing close to see.

"A tie tack," he said. "Apparently our guy's a snazzy dresser."

"Let me see."

"Huh-uh. You're on–" Schanke paused, his face reddening "--vacation, remember?" But Nick still got a good glimpse of the faceted red gem as Schanke slipped it into a clear evidence bag. "At least now I've got something to work with." He left the uniforms and the ambulance attendants to clear up the crime scene and walked back out to the better lighted path. He look at Nick. "By the way, do you often go for midnight strolls in the park."

"Sometimes. Why?"

Schanke made a face and tried some of his humorous repartee. "Oh, I would have expected you to be down at the Raven -- on the make."

Nick smiled, then winced as his head experienced a shooting pain. Schanke's smile faded. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm just -- a bit hung over," he lied. The pain had subsided back into a steady ache again.

Schanke smirked. "I knew it. Too much wine, women, and song."

"Schanke, do you ever get your mind out of the gutter?" He tried to manage a smile.

Schanke's only answer was a shrug. "I got to get back to headquarters." He hesitated. "Need a lift home?"

Nick became serious again. He was still irritated that Schanke had had him pulled off the case. "No," he said.

Schanke looked at him with a hesitant smile, apparently aware of Nick's irritation. "Well, don't party too hearty, buddy," he said, a bit sadly, Nick thought. Then he turned and left.

Nick sighed. He felt weak and -- ineffective. Not just with the case, but with his inability to control his reactions to others. He had missed following up on Schanke's olive branch when if he had pressed himself he might have learned something useful from the man.

The unknown vampire had been powerful. But then he had just made a fresh kill. But Nick was still disappointed in himself. He should have been able to stop him. His abilities were usually there when he needed them -- regardless of how he felt. But tonight they had seemed to desert him, along with his rational thought.

Aching and discouraged, Nick did not even try to fly home. By the time he finally got there, he was famished. But the animal fluid in his refrigerator was only pale comfort. He thought of Natalie and the temptation she had offered. Then, exhausted, he climbed upstairs and fell into bed, clothes and all. Soon he fell into a deep and welcome sleep.

A sleep so deep he didn't even dream. When he woke some hours later, his thoughts were grim. And primarily of Natalie. Could he no longer trust himself around her? She was his first hope of salvation; her doctor's skill and mind could someday free him from his vampirism. But not if he killed her. Much as he loathed the idea, perhaps it was time to find another home. After he found the renegade vampire.

He went downstairs, surprised to see two messages on his answering machine. He hadn't even heard the phone. One was from Janette (asking about the murders) and the other was from Natalie (apologetic and concerned about last night). As he listened to their voices, Nick felt even closer to the edge.

But why? Nick had killed no one in a hundred years -- had not even consumed (except for the rare instance here and there) human blood in the past fifty. He had even prided himself on his control. So why did he feel like he was starving to death?

Nick drained a bottle in the refrigerator, but still felt the same. Dissatisfied and tired. He laid down on the couch and fell asleep again.

* * *

LaCroix was back at the fireplace. "I was part of a cult then. We worshipped Satan," he said. He looked at Nick. "That is why I found you so intriguing, Nicholas. The pure Knight of the Crusades. To corrupt one such as you was a true prize." He smiled.

"Where is this cult?" asked Nick.

LaCroix became serious. "We were discovered, driven out of our land, scattered to the four winds." Nick waited. "For a long time I wandered the world alone. Until I found Janette – and then you."

"And your creator? What happened to him?"

"The last I saw of Jacques DuPrey, he was fleeing a burning tower. But what does it matter, Nicholas? You have me; that is all that counts." He smiled. Then he looked again into the fire. "But those were good times. Men and women dancing naked around the bonfire..." His voice trailed off.

Nick looked into the flames and could almost see figures leaping in them. Then the scene changed and he saw Natalie, nude, swaying seductively, the flames leaping up behind her. He felt drawn by her dark eyes, her white throat – Her heart beat louder and louder.

* * *

A hand was on his brow. Instantly Nick came awake and grabbed the wrist of the intruder – Natalie. He cursed his foolhardiness in giving her the code to his electronic elevator door. Growling, he bared his fangs at her, saw her try to recoil, and fell back exhausted. "Get out," he groaned. "I don't want you here." Could his encounter with the other vampire really have left him feeling so weak?

Natalie extricated her wrist from his grip. "I want to help, Nick."

"Go away."

"Nick, I'm a doctor. If something's wrong with you–"

"I am a vampire!"

"Do you need – more blood, Nick–"

Nick suppressed the vampire in himself and said, surprisingly sure, "It doesn't help."

"Doesn't help! But why? Nick, what's wrong?"

But Nick could no longer answer her. The room wavered around him and he could not focus his eyes or form the words to convey the panic he felt. All he could do was listen to her heart and try to match its rhythm with his own until he slipped into forbidding darkness.

* * *

"Here, let me see," came a voice into Nick's consciousness. He opened his eyes to see Janette on the couch beside him, her hand under his head and a glass to his lips. The smell of blood – human blood – filled his nostrils. He opened his mouth slightly and she poured it in. The blood revived him some, enough so that he could focus on Natalie standing at his feet, watching him anxiously. Janette smiled. "How's that? Better?" asked Janette.

Nick struggled to sit up and took the glass. He drained what was left in it in one gulp. "What are you doing here, Janette?" His head was swimming.

"Natalie called me. She said you seemed -- ill."

"Well... thanks for your concern." His voice sounded weak even to his own ears. But the blood -- he needed the blood.

Nick grabbed for the bottle in Janette's hand, not caring how desperate he looked to the two women. He poured another glass of blood and tossed it off, then poured another. He had almost forgotten how good human blood tasted. His thoughts went to the intimate moments he had shared with Janette two nights ago. Was it that taste of human blood in her veins that made him want more so badly now? He tried to drink the third glass more slowly, so its grip would not devour him. But something was still missing.

"Nicola, I've been talking to friends of *ours*," Janette said. She stared at Nick.

"You can speak in front of Natalie." His voice sounded stronger, so maybe everything would be all right.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

Janette looked doubtful, but proceeded anyway. "I know you usually drink animal blood. When was the last time you had -- human blood?" Nick saw Natalie cringe. He lifted his glass to his lips.

"I think you know when, Janette," he said pointedly, raising an eyebrow.

Janette glanced at the glass, then back at him. "I mean -- *before*."

He thought. "Mmm. About fifty years. Since I regularly drank."

Janette's eyes widened. "Really!" she said. Then she added, "I'm not surprised. You always were -- rather reluctant. But Nick, you are a vampire. You cannot deny your needs for so long without it having *some* effect."

"His needs? Blood is blood," said Natalie.

"He can *survive* on animal blood, but not *thrive* on it. There is -- an added thrill to the kill, isn't there, Nicola?"

Nick could see alarm flash on Natalie's face. Then it was gone, replaced by a hard expression. "Which you would know, no doubt," she said.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Well, that girl was found murdered outside *your* club."

"I had nothing to do with that." Natalie did not look convinced. She had no reason to trust Janette; she did not know Janette as he did. He knew Janette no longer killed either, or at least not in so clumsy a fashion as to leave the evidence just lying about. Times had changed practices.

Nick stood up and the room spun a little. "I don't need that any more, Janette," he said. But as he said it, he felt it was a lie. But could his lack of *killing*, of *consuming*, humans really be the cause of all his recent restlessness and dissatisfaction? "I haven't killed anyone in a hundred years."

"That is your problem," said Janette. He frowned.

"No! I won't accept that! If Nick has lived for a hundred years without killing, then he doesn't need to kill now!"

Janette rose and glared at Natalie. Then she looked at Nick. "Why don't you come home with me, Nicola, and let me give you what you need?"

Natalie opened her mouth in shock. "No, don't listen to her, Nick," she said.

Janette came closer to him and ran her fingers up his arm. "You know you are welcome, Nicola." Her heart was pounding faster and he could feel his own heart striving to join hers. He felt himself sway slightly. It would be so good to go with Janette.

Natalie stepped between him and Janette, pushing her away. "If he needs help, *I'll* help him," she said. Nick strained to separate the confusion of two hearts beating for him.

Janette crossed her arms and smiled broadly. "*You'll* help him? You haven't helped him so far." Fortunately she had forgotten the contact she had been making with Nick as she focused on Natalie. As *he* focused on Natalie.

"This – problem – never came up before. But I can find an answer to it," said Natalie.

"And what if you can't give him what he needs? Would you let him die?"

Nick could feel Natalie's distress, hear it in her heartbeat. "I could never do that," she said quietly.

Janette opened her mouth to say something, but Nick interrupted her, his head finally clearing enough to think straight. "No, Janette. Don't argue. I have to give Natalie a chance to help." He hoped he wasn't making a mistake.

Janette's mouth closed into a hard line. Then she softened. "Very well, Nicola. You know where to find me." She pulled on a heavy, hooded dark cloak. "I'll leave this," she said of the bottle she had brought. She put on dark sunglasses. Then she left.

Nick still was feeling unsteady so he sat again, pouring himself another glass of blood from Janette's bottle. Fortunately the blood was having the effect of stifling his desire for Natalie, even if it was not being completely satisfying. Natalie took a seat in the chair next to him. "Is what she says true, Nick?" she asked.

Nick looked into her anxious dark eyes. "I don't know," he said. "Maybe."

Natalie looked down. "I can try to get you some – stores of human blood. If it would help."

Nick put down the glass. He took her hands and she looked at him. "No. You mustn't do that."

"I – I don't want you to suffer, Nick." She looked at his hands, then back to his face. "Last night, I knew something was wrong. I wanted to help. But you – wanted to attack me, didn't you?"

The memory of his actions worried Nick anew. He let go of her hands. He picked up his glass and walked to the fireplace, not trusting himself to meet her eyes. "Yes," he said. "Maybe I should just leave here, go somewhere else."

"No!" said Natalie. He heard her rise.

"Maybe I'm doomed to forever be a beast, Natalie. Maybe we've just been fooling ourselves, thinking it could be otherwise."

"No, I won't believe that, Nick. Perhaps I can isolate what quality in human blood is necessary for your existence--"

"And do *what* -- *synthesize* it?" He knew he was shouting and hurting her, but he didn't care. He looked at her. "Would I find the synthesized element satisfying, do you think?"

"It's worth a try, Nick."

"Can you synthesize *fear*, Nat? Because that's what the beast craves -- *fear*!" Angry, he tossed the glass into the fireplace, its shatter startling Natalie. The fear he felt in her heart was almost an aphrodisiac, if Janette was to be believed. It was the added something missing even from the human blood she'd brought. It was what that vampire in the alley had wanted from his victim.

He could see Natalie striving for control. Her heart quieted some. "What makes you think it's fear you need?"

"What else could it be? I'm still missing something. What Janette brought me is still not enough!"

"I can't believe you live on fear. You're too good, Nick," said Natalie.

Nick collapsed on the couch again, suddenly tired of it all. He closed his eyes briefly and sighed. "There was a time when they *did* fear me. When I *liked* them to fear me."

"That was the past, Nick," said Natalie. "You're beyond that now." He looked at her.

"Am I, Nat? Am I? If Janette hadn't come, what would you have done to save me?" Natalie didn't reply. "But what she brought me was only a taste of what I need. I feel... empty. I need to feel... fulfilled." He bowed his head.

Natalie hesitated, wringing her hands. Then she sat down on the couch next to Nick. "I'm here, Nick," she said. Her heart beat wildly.

Nick closed his eyes and shook his head. "No," he said. Then he opened his eyes and grasped her arms. "How do you think I'd feel if I harmed you, Natalie? I care about you."

"I love you, Nick," she said breathlessly. Her heart beat with such insistent invitation that he found it difficult to say,

"Don't say that. I can't be close to you -- that way."

"And you can't tell me there's never been anyone else who hasn't known what you are and still loved you."

Natalie was, of course, right. The images of women who had loved him over the years flashed through his forever memory. Most he had left before they could be harmed by the beast within him, but there had been two who... He pushed those thoughts aside, the grief of his separation from Anna and Lizette acute. His weakened condition was making him entirely too sensitive. He had to be firm and made himself say, "I can't. Please, Natalie."

"Did they fear you?"

"No," he admitted.

"Did you make them vampires?"

Nick pushed her away and got up. The way was clear now. "Yes," he said, hating himself for the lie and hoping Natalie would hate him as well. He looked away from her and into the fireplace, awaiting her revulsion.

He heard her rise and come near him. "Did you like it?" she asked. Nick frowned, pained.

"Nat–"

"What did it feel like? What did it *feel* like, Nick?" Nick looked at her. Natalie was looking at him intently, expectantly. "Was it as good as fear? Or better?" She seemed to have forgotten her own feelings and become the scientist again. But Nick felt too raw to answer. "Answer me!"

* * *

Nick was cast back into his memories.

> *Anna's chambermaid was in his arms, her heart weakening as he drained her blood. He let the dead woman drop from his grasp. Then he turned and saw – Anna.*
>
> *Nick expected fear and revulsion, but Anna only watched numbly. She must be in shock, he thought. And I have lost her forever. He turned to flee.*
>
> *"No, do not go," she said. Nick halted and watched dumbfounded as she approached. "What are you?"*
>
> *"I am – a vampire. I must leave now."*
>
> *"Why?"*
>
> *"I – do not want to hurt you. I should never have – never have –"*
>
> *"But I love you," said Anna.*
>
> *Nick's heart leaped. "After what you have seen?"*
>
> *"I will always love you, Nicholas. Please – do not leave me."*
>
> *"Anna, I –" She moved closer and embraced him.*
>
> *"I love you. Nothing else matters." Her heart was strong, the love in it singing until his heart was singing too. When she lifted her face to be kissed, Nick did not hesitate. And when his lips fastened on her throat, there was a bliss and a satisfaction such as he had never known.*
>
> *But the bliss was too seductive. Before he knew it, Anna lay dead in his arms, gone from him forever.*

* * *

"Anna," he said, not aware that he had spoken aloud.

"Who's Anna?" asked Natalie. Nick focused his mind back on the present.

"Someone I loved. Long ago."

"Was she afraid?"

"No."

"Is she a vampire?" He looked away from her.

"She was -- she's gone now." His grief at the memory of Anna's demise was apparent even to Natalie. Her voice softened.

"I'm sorry, Nick. But I have to ask – was it satisfying to take her?"

Nick was angered at first until he realized Natalie was being scientific. "More satisfying that I ever would have thought possible. For whatever good it does you to know that."

"It does a lot of good. It proves fear is not the answer."

He raised his eyebrows. "Then what is?"

"Hormones." Nick was confused and must have looked it because Natalie continued, "I know you're confused, Nick, but trust me. I may be able to help." She hesitated, then said, "Nick, do you feel – any better? I mean, do you need any more human blood or do you think you'll be okay for a while?"

Nick sat on the couch again. His head was clearer and he was not as tired. But he didn't know how long it would last. He smiled nevertheless. "I'll be all right. For a while. And – I've got Janette's bottle if I need a boost."

"Good. I don't think I'll be too long, but I have to go to the lab." She smiled at him and soon was gone. Nick was not sorry to see her go; the nearness of her was no longer a distraction. Tired, he closed his eyes.

* * *

Night had fallen and he was hungry. The hunting the last two nights had been mostly good, except for his encounter with the blond vampire in the park. That interruption had interfered with his pleasure. So that tonight his appetite craved something deeper.

He looked around the warehouse district he found himself in. What he needed was a suitable location. He took to the air.

After a brief time, the stranger saw below him what he wanted – a warehouse that looked deserted. He flew down to it, touching ground lightly. A FOR SALE sign and number were on the door of the building. He listened for guards, but heard nothing but the wind. He moved closer and peered into a window. Except for a few boxes, the warehouse was almost empty.

He examined the edges of the window, seeing wiring that indicated a burglar alarm system. After some searching, he found the control box. He opened it and pulled out the activation wiring.

Then he smiled. Now he was ready. He flew back up into the sky.

A few blocks further on, he saw his quarry. A woman, dressed in a suit, was leaving what appeared to be a warehouse office. She was alone.

The stranger swooped down. The woman looked up in alarm and started to run. But he caught her easily, rising lightly again into the air.

The woman tried to scream, but he covered her mouth with one hand. "Not yet, my darling," he said. "Not yet. There will be plenty of time for such – fun – later." She struggled, then went limp in his arms, having fainted from her fear.

The man in black frowned. He hoped he hadn't made a mistake. He wanted his evening to be a veritable feast of fear.

He turned his flight back to the warehouse he had prepared.

* * *

Nick woke to the sound of his phone ringing. The clock indicated that night had fallen. He suppressed the strain and emptiness he felt to say, "Yeah, who is it?"

"It's me, Schanke," came his partner's voice. Nick looked at the bottle in front of him. He switched the phone over to speaker mode. "Nick?"

Nick hesitated before saying, "Schanke. What can I do for you?" He lifted his bottle to his lips and took a drink.

"I need your help on the serial murder case."

"I can't help you. Stonetree's orders. I'm on *vacation*, remember?"

"Yeah, Nick. I'm – sorry about that, okay?" There was a brief silence before he continued. "I really need your help."

Nick decided to make Schanke sweat a little. "Why should I help you? Give me a reason."

"Okay, so I know I shouldn't expect your help. If you won't do it for me, at least do it for Janette."

Nick was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Okay, Schanke. For *Janette*, not you." He silently thanked the powers that be for the opportunity to make it up with his partner. Maybe Schanke would get access to information Nick could use to track down the killer.

Schanke heaved a sigh. "Hey, thanks buddy. I won't forget this."

Nick put down his bottle. "What do you want me to do, Schanke?"

"I'm bein' stonewalled at the Raven, Nick. Maybe they'll talk to you. *Someone* has to have seen something." Nick sighed. Schanke must have really been getting nowhere on the case.

"Okay, I'll talk to them again. See what I can turn up."

"Great! So should I come pick you up?"

Nick considered. Natalie had left -- two hours ago? Had she finished what she had set out to do or was she still at the lab? Better find out first. "No. No. It wouldn't look good if someone from the station saw us together. We don't need trouble with Stonetree."

"Yeah, you're right. So what do you want me to do?"

"Hang loose. I'll call you if I find out anything."

"Okay. I'll be waiting. And Nick --" He paused. "I *do* appreciate this."

"Later," Nick replied. He listened as Schanke hung up the phone and smiled. Nick had hardly switched off the phone when he heard his elevator door opening.

Natalie was back. She seemed excited as she took a hypodermic needle from her bag.

"What's that?" asked Nick.

"Hopefully the answer. Roll up your sleeve, Nick." Nick frowned wryly but did as she asked.

"What are you giving me?"

"Hormones." He looked at her, puzzled. "There are certain substances produced by a person in love that circulate through the bloodstream. It's technical, but if you want an explanation --"

"No, no," Nick laughed. Then suddenly he felt a rush and blinked. He felt a thrill almost like passion to the depths of his being. He took a deep, shuddering breath.

"What's the matter?" asked Natalie, a worried look on her face.

Nick hesitated, then said, "Nothing. But --" and he took a second deep breath "-- whatever was in that shot, Nat, was pretty... arousing." The sensation was fading, but still felt quite pleasant. The tenseness and emptiness and dissatisfaction he had been feeling were gone. "What was in that shot, Nat?"

"How do you feel?" Nick got up. He felt alive -- energized.

"Wonderful! I -- can't explain it except to say my -- need is gone." Not only gone -- it was almost no more than a dim memory.

"Then it worked."

"What worked?"

"Hormones," she said. Nick watched as Natalie's face turned a deep scarlet. Then she pulled herself together and became the scientist again. She got out another hypodermic.

"I'll need a sample of your blood for analysis." Nick stood mutely while she took her sample. "Do you still feel the need to have -- human blood?"

Nick looked at Janette's bottle, remembering the taste of its contents. But the human blood had been no more satisfying than animal blood. Only Natalie's "hormones" had preserved his sanity. For a time, at least, he knew the animal blood was enough. And, with Natalie's help, maybe one day he wouldn't need that either. "No. I can do without it."

"Good. This could be a real breakthrough, Nick."

"To my coming over?" She nodded. He took her hands. "Then I'll have you to thank," he said, smiling into her eyes – those large, appealing dark eyes. Natalie moved closer, expectantly. He could feel her heart pounding, his own trying to match it, and realized it was still too soon. She was too much of a temptation still.

So, sighing, Nick let her go and moved back. "I have to go," he said.

"Go? Go where?"

"Schanke called. He's getting nowhere on the case."

"But – isn't that good?"

"Yeah, I suppose. I can't let the police solve these murders. But *I* have to solve them, Nat."

"Schanke mentioned you found the body in the park."

"I did more than find the body. I almost caught the culprit."

"You did! What happened?"

"He backhanded me into a tree. Gave me one hell of a headache."

"Headache! Is that why –"

"No, it had nothing to do with my – illness. I was feeling bad long before that." He smiled. "But I'm better now. And now that I know what he looks like, maybe I'll be able to find him and stop him." He put on his leather jacket and opened the window.

"Be careful, Nick," said Natalie. Her dark eyes looked worried.

"Don't worry, Nat," said Nick. Then he rose out of the window and into the night.

The cool air was exhilarating and he almost hated to arrive so soon afterwards at the Raven. The club was busy, although he noticed several stares from the vampires he recognized as he made his way through the crowd.

Janette was behind the bar and smiled when she saw him. "Nicola! You look wonderful!"

"I feel wonderful."

"So... your doctor friend was able to help? Perhaps in a direct way, hmm?" She studied him expectantly.

"Sorry to disappoint you," he said. "I didn't drink her blood."

Janette looked down. "Too bad." Then she looked back at him. "So, she pulled off some 'medical miracle,' did she?"

"Something like that."

"I hope you know what you're doing. Speaking of which, what are you doing here?"

"Schanke called. Says he's been stonewalled here."

"What did you expect?"

"Oh, I'm in agreement. But he asked me to help."

"What do you mean – help?" Janette looked dismayed.

Nick smiled. "Don't get excited. The police won't be involved." He became serious again. "But I have to see that whoever did these murders pays for them." Janette looked down again. "What have you been able to find out?" Glancing around, she pulled him into the back room.

"Not much. No one here is admitting responsibility."

"That's because no one here *is* responsible." Briefly he related his encounter with the strange vampire in the park.

"So it is a renegade," said Janette. "We had considered it, but with only the two murders, we weren't sure that it might not be a problem here. But another open murder -- no one here would have taken such a risk."

"We've got to find him, Janette. Before the police do."

Janette looked thoughtful. "I'll put out some eyes and ears. With your description, they'll know what to look for. You can count on our help."

"I appreciate that. I may need it." He looked around. "I've got to go out and search now."

"Be careful, Nicola."

He smiled. "I will." Then he let himself out the back door and was gone.

Nick rose again into the night. He couldn't explain why, but he felt an aerial surveillance would be profitable. Fortunately the night was cloudy so he wasn't concerned about being seen. He took care not to get too close to any well lighted areas, however. While he flew, he opened his hearing to its fullest potential. Perhaps he could pick up on the renegade's next attack and with any luck it would be his *last* one.

Nick turned his flight to the darker, unoccupied warehouse district. Despite the renegade's open disregard for possible discovery and pursuit, Nick reasoned that the man would still seek a quiet resting place. He seemed to thrive on the fear of his victims, which might work against him. Especially if the vampire decided to *prolong* the experience.

Nick flew on, sensing nothing out of the ordinary. Maybe his hunch was wrong. Maybe he should just return to the Raven – wait for Janette's companions to run the renegade to ground.

Then his ears picked up a sound. "Please – let me go," came a woman's voice. The fear in it was markedly apparent. Nick strained his hearing to its limits. He heard the vampire growl and the woman scream in terror. The sound seemed to be coming from a warehouse below.

Nick sped down. A skylight in the roof was no impediment to his flight. He'd probably given up any element of surprise. But his only thought was to save the mortal – before she became the renegade's fourth victim.

He dropped to the floor lightly. The warehouse was mostly dark and almost empty; there were only a few crates at one end of the large room. A bare lightbulb shone dimly there.

Nick approached the lighted area warily. He could hear the mortal woman's fear engulfed heart and some muffled sounds from her. She was still alive. When he got close enough, he saw her. She was tied to a chair, a gag in her mouth. Nick rushed over to her, looking around as he did but seeing nothing else. Had the renegade flown?

Nick turned his thoughts to the woman, untying her and removing the gag from her mouth. She was crying. "Are you all right?" he asked. Anxiously he looked at her throat; it was smooth and unblemished. Apparently the renegade hadn't felt enough fear from her yet. "Look, my name's Knight. Metro Police."

"Metro Police!" exclaimed a man's voice. Nick turned away from the woman and straightened up. The vampire from the park stood before him. He looked Nick up and down.

Nick put his hand on the woman's shoulder. Not daring to take his eyes off the renegade, he said, "Do you remember how to get out of here?"

"I – I think so," she said.

"Then go. Now." The stranger growled, baring his fangs. The woman jumped up from the chair and ran. Nick leaped at the renegade, hoping he was strong enough to buy her the time she needed to get away.

The other vampire caught Nick by his jacket and tossed him aside like a discarded apple core. Nick hit the floor heavily and for a moment lay stunned.

But the renegade didn't flee or pursue the woman. Instead he stood and looked at Nick. "Vampire policemen. What is the world coming to?"

Nick got to his feet, prepared to do further battle. The renegade stood easily, unafraid. Nick wished he had had time to contact the vampires at the Raven. He could sense this vampire was powerful – and something else. He frowned.

The vampire spoke. "Do we – know each other?"

"No," said Nick. But even as he said it, it sounded wrong.

The stranger studied him. "You are – yes, you are one of LaCroix's."

Nick was surprised. "How did you know that?"

"A vampire always knows his children – no matter how far the blood ties are removed from him."

Suddenly Nick understood. He looked at the man before him more closely. "Jacques DuPrey."

The vampire bowed, his dark eyes, however, never leaving Nick. "How is LaCroix?"

"He's dead," said Nick, not without some satisfaction. Nick had finally come to terms with LaCroix's evil when he had found Nick again in Toronto. He had paid LaCroix back for the murders of his loves with the stake and with fire.

DuPrey sighed. "Too bad. We shared some interesting times." Then his face hardened. "But you – you would oppose me?"

"I must. Surely you understand the danger you're presenting to the other vampires here."

"You mean the cult in the Raven? What are they to me? I am the avenging angel of Satan -- my mission to send as many mortal souls to his domain as possible."

"The cult you belonged to is finished," said Nick. At least he hoped so.

"But its purpose has not. We are vampires. It is our sacred duty."

"It's not my duty."

"So I see," said DuPrey, his expression dark. "Then you are my enemy." His eyes turned yellow again and he bared his fangs, growling.

Then suddenly DuPrey was upon Nick, moving so quickly that he seemed a blur. Nick called on all his vampire abilities to ward off the attack. That DuPrey was a more powerful vampire than him was readily apparent. The other man fastened his hands on Nick's throat and tightened his grip.

Nick couldn't breathe. Desperately, he tried to fly up into the air to get away. DuPrey came with him, never loosening his grip on Nick's throat. Nick dived for the floor, where they hit and rolled.

But DuPrey maintained his grip. The room started to spin around in Nick's vision and he thought, ironically, was this how it would end? Killed by one of his own kind? Like Nick had killed LaCroix?

Because DuPrey *could* kill him. Nick realized he didn't even need a stake or fire. All he needed to do was drain the blood from Nick's body -- then leave him out in the open. Nick would be paralyzed without blood, and the sun would do the rest. He looked up into DuPrey's face hovering over his own.

DuPrey released his grip on Nick's throat. He smiled at Nick and said, "No. I won't kill you now." Nick gasped for breath. He tried to move, throw off DuPrey, but the vampire held him in an immobile grip. "You intrigue me. I can see why LaCroix chose you."

"Why?" Nick croaked.

"For your goodness. Somehow -- you have not lost it." The sound of sirens approaching in the night made the renegade look up briefly. Then he looked again at Nick. "How have you managed to preserve your goodness in the face of your corruption?" He released Nick and stood up. Nick struggled to his feet also, still prepared to battle DuPrey -- even if it killed him. There were voices outside the building now. The police.

DuPrey smiled. "Very well, *policeman*. I will leave this place -- for now. Unless you again wish to oppose me."

Nick stood ready, but he knew he was no match for DuPrey alone. He let his features return to normal, suppressing the vampire. "No," he said, looking down.

DuPrey smiled again. "Then I will leave. But this is not finished. We *will* meet again." Then the man rose in a blur up through the skylight and was gone.

The police were breaking in the main door and Nick realized he shouldn't be found there. He rose through the skylight to the roof. The woman he'd rescued was with the police below. She'd remember him. What could he do? Then he saw Schanke's car drive up. Worse and worse. But maybe...

Careful not to be observed, Nick flew down behind the building. Then he walked around to the front, where Schanke saw him. "Hey, Knight! What are you doing here? Don't tell me you're out for a stroll."

"As a matter of fact, I was," he said. "What's up?"

"There's nothing here!" came a man's voice from inside the warehouse. "But there looks like there's been one hell of a fight!"

Schanke studied Nick, then looked at the woman beside him. "Miss Densham here almost became a victim of the serial killer. I think," he added confusedly. "You tell *me*, Nick."

Nick fastened his gaze on the woman and exerted his hypnotic influence on her so she wouldn't take her eyes away. "This is the man who rescued you, isn't it," said Schanke, looking at her.

"No, we've never met," said Nick. He insinuated the reply deeply into Miss Densham's thoughts.

"No. We've never met," said the woman, mesmerized.

"What? But you said a policeman was in trouble –"

"She was probably confused," said Nick, his eyes still on the woman's eyes. "Frightened." Again he forced her to agree with his statements.

"Yes. I was – I was very frightened. I don't know –"

"Well, at least you're alive. We'll figure out the rest downtown. With your description of the assailant, we should be able to put out an A.P.B. and run him down in no time." Nick concentrated his thoughts further.

"I don't know, Schanke. It's pretty dark." He kept his gaze on the woman's eyes. "Perhaps she doesn't remember."

"Sure she does, Nick," said Schanke, frowning.

"No. No, I don't – remember." Satisfied, Nick released his hold over Miss Densham. "Really, I don't!" she said, looking at Schanke. Nick drew closer and put an arm around her, smiling.

"Hush. It's all right now. It's just a reaction to your experience; I'm sure that after you've recovered enough to feel safe again, you'll remember." But Nick was secure in the knowledge that he had succeeded in erasing her memories. "Schanke, maybe it would be a good idea to take Miss Densham to the hospital – see if she's okay."

"Yeah, sure, Nick," said Schanke, bemused. Nick was amused by his partner's discomfiture, but tried not to let it show. He watched as Schanke took the woman over to one of the police cars and helped her in.

After the police car drove away, Schanke came over to Nick again. He looked Nick over. "How did you get so dirty?"

Nick looked down at his clothes. He had forgotten that the fight he'd had with DuPrey had left its signs. "Oh, I fell down," he said.

"You fell down?" asked Schanke in apparent disbelief.

"Yeah, I fell down," Nick insisted. Schanke studied him with raised eyebrow.

"Were you involved with whatever happened here tonight?"

"No. I told you; I was out walking. I just came over because I heard the sirens." He paused, then continued. "Shouldn't you be examining the crime scene?"

"Yeah. Since you're here, you can lend me your expertise."

"Happy to oblige." They went into the warehouse and began to look around. The chair the woman had been tied to was in pieces, victim of the battle between Nick and DuPrey. Schanke gathered what evidence he could and then he and Nick walked back out to Schanke's car.

"Well, once Miss Densham gets over her shock, we'll be able to make some real progress on this case."

"I don't think you'll have to worry, Schanke," said Nick. His partner looked at him in shock. "Miss Densham survived. She'll be able to I.D. him. I think he'll leave town."

Schanke sighed. "Yeah. You're probably right." He paused. "But the evidence will be on the database for other jurisdictions. Damn!"

"What is it?"

"I really wanted to solve this one."

Nick smiled. "Who knows? You still might."

"No. He'll fly out of here." Nick glanced up into the night sky, but there was no sign of DuPrey. "I just hope -- the next place he turns up has better luck."

"The case will stay open, Schanke. We may bring him to trial... someday."

But Nick had a feeling that they would not.

Schanke opened his car door. He thought of something. "I thought you were going to go to the Raven."

"I did. Didn't have any luck," Nick lied. "Sorry."

Schanke sighed. "Oh well, it probably doesn't matter now." He got in the car. "I've got to go to the hospital, get a statement, then go back to headquarters and make my report. I don't suppose you'd like to help..." he said hopefully.

"Who me? I'm on vacation." Nick smiled.

"Yeah, you lucky dog. Wish I had one."

"Corner Stonetree. Maybe he'll feel generous."

"Not a chance. See you later, okay?"

"Later." He watched as Schanke drove away. Then he walked off into the shadows of some nearby buildings. When he was sure no one was about, he rose up into the night sky. He headed for the Raven.

"What happened to you?" asked Janette as he walked into the club. She brushed at the dirt on his jacket.

Nick took her arm. "Let's go in the back and I'll tell you." Once they were in the back room, Nick told Janette what had happened at the warehouse. He concluded with Schanke's investigation and his assurance, "I'm sure DuPrey has gone for now. The murder file will be left open, of course, but I don't think you'll need to worry about the police poking their noses in here anymore." The one thing that still bothered him was that DuPrey's crimes had gone unpunished.

Janette touched his arm. "We'll be ready to help you whenever he decides to return." Nick smiled gratefully at her understanding and her smile for him was warm in return. She moved closer to him. "Well, since the case is -- solved, maybe you'd like to stay a while -- perhaps pick up where we left off the other night?"

It was an enticing idea, but Nick shrugged it aside. "Some other time. Nat's waiting --" He noticed a frown of irritation cross Janette's face. He bent down and kissed her briefly on the lips. She swayed closer to him. "Take care of yourself, Janette."

"You too, Nicola. Always."

Nick left her and flew back to his apartment.

As he suspected, Nat was still there waiting for him. "Well?" she asked.

"Case solved, Nat."

"Do I get to know anything about it?"

"It's better you don't." No need to worry her by telling her about DuPrey.

Natalie moved closer to him. "Still feel all right?" she asked.

"Yeah. Thanks, Nat." He sat down on the couch and she sat down beside him.

"I'll -- have to analyze your blood sample. See how long the -- satisfaction -- lasts. You'll let me know if it gets bad again, won't you?"

"Scout's honor," said Nick, smiling and raising his hand. Natalie looked down.

"Nick, about what I said -- about loving you." She looked at him. Her heart had started to pound faster and he could feel the desire rising in him to match the sound of her heartbeats with his own. He fought back the impulse and the danger it implied. Whatever she had given him -- at least it leant control. He took her hands.

"I do care about you, Nat." He couldn't say love, couldn't bear to increase her pain. "But I'm still -- what I am. It's too dangerous for you to be too close to me." He could see in her eyes that what he said was not what she had wanted to hear.

But she took it well. She pulled her jacket together and rose from the couch. He watched, puzzled, as she walked over to the refrigerator. She reached into it and took out the hypodermic with his blood sample in it. She smiled wryly. "See? I haven't totally forgotten myself. Couldn't let this sample go to waste." She put it in her bag and began to pull on her coat.

Nick rose awkwardly from the couch and said, "You don't have to leave, Natalie."

She looked at him. "Yes, I do. I do. It's better for both of us right now." Nick moved closer to escort her to the door. She allowed it, but maintained a mental distance between them that was palpable. At the door, she looked at him again and said, "Get some rest, Nick."

Nick frowned and fumbled for something to say, but could think of nothing except a lame, "You too, Nat." He smiled.

Natalie smiled back and stepped into the elevator. The door closed and she was gone.

Nick walked back out to the refrigerator and took out a bottle of animal blood. Not the enticing human concoction that DuPrey craved, but it would do him very well. He poured some blood into a glass and studied the liquid, thinking of the common link that he shared with DuPrey and how different their approach was to the lust for blood.

Then he drank.

--The End--

Vampire VCRs: A Speculation

(overhead on the Internet FORKNI-L list)

by John Dencoff, Barbara Reid, and Salieri

Salieri: The first thing I thought of was: Where does a vampire bite to bring a VCR over? Would a vampire VCR have special powers? Being able to show images without a monitor would be a helpful one...

Barb: Would their crossing over be affected by whether they were originally Beta format or VHS? If so, would they cower at the sight of a remote channel changer? And how about the permanent damage that remote microwaves could inflict on them, causing them to live forever shielded by lead slabs? Or would they avoid the problem by avoiding power lines and large transformers?

John:

1. The vampire has to bite the power cord.
2. Vampire VCRs have the following powers:

- They are immune to technical problems, such as those caused by weak transmissions and weaselly cable companies.
- They are immortal, requiring no service contracts.
- They are machines of the night, being able to tape cable shows that are shown very late.
- They can feed off the signals of other VCRs, when hooked in serial or parallel.
- They have ultra-speedy rewind.
- They have the strength of 10 ordinary VCRs, being able to play tapes even when recorded in superVHS.
- They *never* eat tapes, even cheapo foreign brands.
- Finally, they have *flying* erase and recording heads, and can transform into really mean boomboxes.

3. Ah! But they do have limits:

- Immersion in running water or holy water will kill them!
- Direct exposure to sunlight causes them great pain.
- A stake through the tape-insertion slot will damage them!
- They can be *controlled* by holy remotes, doing whatever you ask!
- Removing their heads is *not* good.
- They can become sick with signal interference if the holy Nintendo is played on the same output TV.

This is all *true!!!* I've seen them! They exist!

It's In the Cards

by Barbara Reid

Barb writes:

> *This piece of fanfic occurred to me after reading a real post from a newbie on the Vampyres e-mail list. Let me just say: the person posting was very, VERY new to THAT list. The message itself was HIGHLY amusing. For example :*
>
> *"Has anyone here read some books about vampyres by Anne Rice? (I think that's her name). I hear one of them will be made into a movie. Someone cute (Tom Cruise? Keannu Reeves? Gene Wilder?) is playing the lead. Has anyone heard anything about this?"*
>
> *(Gene Wilder?) Notice I'm protecting the name of the neophyte and not naming names! All this made me ask myself: what if one of our favorite Forever Knight characters suddenly started picking up intensive interactive literary interests? Ok. I don't know about you, but I'M inspired...*

"JANETTE!"

Interrupted in the middle of her conversation with the Toronto police detective, Janette looked across the length of the crowded bar. Spotting the tall, slim red-head, she raised a perfectly arched eyebrow.

"JANETTE!" The red-headed vampire named Alma strode quickly over. She had a pad of paper in her hand, and a pencil. "I'm borrowing your card again."

"Really? Why don't you just get another?"

"Come on, you know how they get so fussy checking references, address, all that crap. It gets real slow."

"Why, darling, don't you just quit going? It's so boring there, so very... dead."

Nick looked puzzled. "Boring where?" The Toronto detective liked to keep a casual eye on the habits of the Raven's customers. Their amusements and diversions were – not like the rest of the population. The potential for trouble was always high, something he liked to divert early before the line was crossed.

"Hey, I get a kick out of going in there all dressed in black, dead white makeup, long cloak. They love it. This one really strange guy always talks to me. Oooh, he makes lots of really weird suggestions. Told me I remind him of someone in a movie. And he shows me all the good sections. So, do it. Write it down for me again."

"Weird suggestions?" Nick was interested.

Janette noticed his response with disgust. Shrugging, she took the pad of paper in her hand and started writing. "Same one again, yes?"

"It's good! And the ultra-nerd guy suggested it. After he saw me in the folklore traditions section." She thought. "It's by -- what's his name, Stoker. I haven't looked at it in a while."

"Bram Stoker?" Nick suggested casually. "You're reading *Dracula*?"

"Ya!" said Alma, "that's the title. That's the name of the book the guy recommended. So I'm a few centuries behind in my reading. Hey, I got lots of time to catch up." She grabbed the paper and almost turned to go. She stopped, puzzlement crinkling her perfect forehead.

"Oh, and -- anyone ever tell you about a book called *Doctor Who*?"

They shook their heads. Together. In unison.

"Me either. Except I know he doesn't age. Or can't die. Anyway, thanks!"

"Anytime, ma cherie."

Nick watched her leave through the heavy, swinging doors of The Raven. "Is she going to a library?"

"Surprising, isn't it?"

"They must love it when she walks in with that outfit on."

"And only after dark, too!" She smirked at the silliness of it. "She said it was the perfect touch."

He swung around to face Janette again. His hands played with the pencil left on the counter top. He started doodling a scene of the club, with the big, heavy door near the top, rays of light creeping in through an opening. "Can't she write?"

"Yes, of course. In three languages. French, Basque and English. Why?"

"Why'd she make you write it down for her?"

"Are you kidding? Alma spell?"

"She can't spell?"

"In three languages." They giggled.

Gasping for breath, Nick squeaked out, "She's got your library card, just don't give her your computer account!"

Janette put a hand on her stomach, trying to hold the air in so she could talk and not laugh. "Oh, no problem! She's not getting my account! I made sure of that! She's GOT HER OWN!" Janette whooped.

Nick froze. The implications here could be awesome. How could they ever begin to keep track of what she did on a computer network? Who she talked to, what she said. What kind of meetings she would arrange under the covering blanket of darkness with the software only knew what poor innocents out there.

He spoke softly. "Oh, shit!"

--The End--

Ashes to Ashes

by Karin Welss and Marian Gibbons

This story is a sequel to "Say Goodbye to the Light," which appeared in Issue #1. For I Have Sinned *has always been one of my favorite FK episodes--I absolutely loved the flashback in it. It was fun to be able to pick up where "For I Have Sinned" left off.*

-- Karin

Rouen, May 31st, 1431

In the darkness before dawn, no one saw the man standing silently in the midst of the market square, where a large patch of scorched cobblestones bore witness to a martyrdom.

Nicholas traced the outline of the sooty stones with his eyes. The rest of the ashes -- her ashes -- had already been scattered, cast into the river the moment the pyre had cooled. The orders had been clear: there were to be no relics.

The predawn breeze sprang up, tugging at the edges of his cloak with gentle fingers. He had watched the fire burn, taking her with it as it died down to embers, while he was trapped within cool stone walls, hiding from the sunlight of midmorning like a coward. *Pray for me,* whispered the ghost of her voice, carried on the current of cool night air.

"I cannot," Nicholas whispered. "A damned creature such as myself... but how I wish -- how I wish..."

The breeze touched his lips, like a faint kiss. *You've been following me.* He heard her clear voice ring suddenly loud in his memory, and saw, with the exquisite torture of his perfect vampire memory, her face staring back at him, pale and defiant in the dimness of the chapel. Thus she had challenged him at their first meeting three years ago.

He had been bored, and intrigued by reports of a visionary peasant girl. And had followed her as far as the chapel of St.-Nicolas-de-Septfonds on her first, abortive journey to meet with the Dauphin of France.

You've been following me. And so he had. And so he would... She had named him, who he was, what he was, and faced him without recoiling. The man of the night... creature of Darkness.

Courage -- what is your other name? he heard his own voice echoing in memory.

Jehanne, she had replied, looking back at him without fear.

"Yes, I'm following you, Jehanne," Nicholas said aloud, feeling the cobblestones hard and rounded beneath his feet, and seeing the cloudy sky lightening to gray with excruciating slowness. He looked down, at the powdery ashes that marked her passing. And reached beneath his cloak to draw forth two pieces of crooked wood, crudely bound together by strips of leather, ignoring the burning of his flesh where it touched her cross. The sight of it had brought her comfort in her last minutes, before

the fire consumed her; let it keep him company also, before the brilliant light of the dawn burned the flesh from his bones and crumbled them to dust.

I will pray for you, Nicholas -- I will pray for us both.

Ashes to ashes... dust to dust... Nicholas threw back his hood, revealing his bright hair, set his gaze firmly to the gray sky of the east, and waited for the dawn. The scent of his own hand, burning, rose to his nostrils, but he did not release his grip on her relic. She had been accused of many things, and invoking devils had been one of them. For that, he was probably to blame. She had called him "the man of the night," which he was--both more and less than a man.

You've been following me.

Yes. And the truth, in the pale grayness: *I have nowhere else to go.*

* * *

The horizon was beginning to lighten, and Nicholas strained to see the dark outline of the hills behind the city. Perhaps he could yet catch a glimpse of the real greens and browns of a daytime landscape, before the sun rose and annihilated him. He thought, with profound regret, of colors that his nighttime existence denied him, and which had existed only in his memory and on his paintbrush for two centuries.

"Nicholas, you fool!"

That voice, hated, familiar. LaCroix -- his savior, his master, his Satan. Nicholas saw the dark-cloaked form rushing at him from across the marketplace, the pale hair gleaming like a beacon in the gray predawn light. "What exactly do you think you're doing!?"

"Leave me alone. I've lived too long already." Nicholas tried to say, but a rushing wind robbed him of speech, knocked him off his feet, and sent the darkness down to conquer the emerging daylight.

* * *

When he opened his eyes again, he saw that he was in the villa's cellar. LaCroix had bought this house years ago, and had used it as a local base of operations ever since. The walls of the cellar were lined in racks filled with ancient pottery amphorae. He could guess what filled those jugs. LaCroix planned for every contingency.

Every contingency, even Nicholas' own suicide.

He was lying on a bed, just planks, really, covered with straw, and fine linens, embroidered by Janette in their endless daylight imprisonments. He felt like those linens, pierced by the needles of his hunger, drawn into patterns that once meant something he had forgotten now.

He tried to rise, to leave this bed of suffering, but he discovered a new and exquisite shame.

He was tied up. His bonds were of silk, fastening his wrists together. He tested them desultorily, and found his muscles refused to function as they usually did, when he'd been feeding well. He felt so tired, too. *Why fight it?* he asked himself, and closed his eyes again.

Behind his closed eyelids, he saw the reflected light of the pyre. Her pyre. The flickering light blinded him. It was so bright.

After a day and a night, LaCroix came to him. The small, windowless room was utterly dark, and Nicholas was still lying, fully dressed, fully tied, on the low bed. LaCroix's black-cloaked figure threw a monstrous shadow on the wall, and the candelabra made his white hair glow.

LaCroix looked down at his convert for a long moment, frowning, then said contemptuously, "Don't tell me that you're pining away for that deluded peasant girl."

Nicholas did not move, but he closed his eyes. "She was a saint, LaCroix."

LaCroix gave an incredulous snort: "A saint? Don't make me laugh, Nicholas. She was a troublemaker – a woman dressed in armor, playing at soldiering. I'm surprised that they let her live as long as they did."

There was a long pause, then Nicholas said quietly: "I offered to bring her across." He opened his eyes fully for the first time, and they were dark blue with pain.

"You didn't!" LaCroix replied, amusement and horror mingling in his voice.

Nicholas continued, as if LaCroix had not spoken: "And she refused me. She knew what they were going to do to her, and she refused me."

LaCroix put the candelabra on a small table, and stood at attention against the wall. "Quite the ladies' man, aren't you? You must have made her an attractive offer, indeed -- that she preferred to burn alive," he sneered.

Nicholas made a choked sound, and LaCroix smiled, pleased to get a reaction from his protege at last. He stepped closer to the bed, and reached down to touch Nick's face. "Did you seriously hope to defy me by making a convert of your own?"

Nicholas fell silent and closed his eyes again, shutting out the hated voice, the hated touch.

LaCroix's grip tightened around his jaw, and he forced Nicholas to look at him. "Nicholas, Nicholas, Nicholas," he shook his head in mock sadness. "When will you ever learn? I thought that we had cured you of your childish defiance long ago."

Nicholas, instead of responding, merely shut his eyes wearily and turned his face back to the wall. He had not fed since watching Joan burn, and his hunger was rapidly turning to a burning agony. But LaCroix was not yet finished with him.

* * *

In the days and nights that followed, LaCroix tried again and again to get a response from Nicholas. He tried threats, insults, even pleading, but Nicholas only turned his face to the wall, refusing to listen to a voice that held nothing for him but pain.

"I will never let you go," LaCroix whispered in his ear."Nicholas, you must listen to me."

Nick's mind responded, "Why?" but the impulse never reached his lips. He could block out the sound of that hated voice, but he could not block out the hated touch, the jesses that LaCroix used to bind him and tame him to his glove. But it no longer mattered. All hatred, all emotions had been burned away in Joan's pyre, and only the shell of a man remained, bound to life in a cellar. Nicholas shut himself away, escaped his jesses, and flew free, straining towards the sunlight.

He only spoke once, as LaCroix rose up to depart, angrily straightening his clothes in temporary defeat.

"Leave the candles, LaCroix," he told his master, in a blank voice.

And LaCroix did.

* * *

Even Janette was unable to rouse him.

Nicholas awoke from a half-dream to see a the dark-haired figure of a woman at his bedside. His memory deceived him, and for a moment he thought he was in the chapel of St.-Nicolas-de-Septfonds, challenging a peasant girl in whom the Light burned like an unwavering beacon. *I will pray for you Nicholas. I will pray for us both...*

"Well, it didn't do either of us much good, did it?" he asked her bitterly, his voice hoarse with thirst and disuse.

And he was jolted back to reality when he heard Janette reply in a concerned tone. The sense of her words slipped past him, and he made no attempt to reach out and comprehend them. He felt her touch at his wrists and ankles, loosing the silken cords that had pretended to bind him.

Janette was strong. She could take care of herself; she always had. He turned his face away from her, and refused to acknowledge her presence.

"Nicholas -- please!" Janette's voice again, impatient and concerned. He wished she would leave him alone. His hunger had finally subsided into a vast lethargy. He only wanted to sleep, to let the warm darkness claim him, to see the colors of the dawn one last time... "Don't do this, please -- not for a mortal! She is dead -- and she would have died anyway, in time. It just happened a little bit sooner, that is all. Can't you see that?"

And when still he did not reply, she tried one last gambit: "You swore to be my true knight!"

He turned his face to her, wearily. It was so hard to summon speech; he scarcely knew why he bothered. "I've sworn so many oaths, Janette -- to the Templars, to you, to LaCroix-- and broken them all... I couldn't even save her -- although I tried to. As God and the Devil are my witnesses, I offered her immortality, and she refused me. And went into the fire..."

His eyes slipped away from the hold of Janette's sapphire gaze, and focused on the wavering flame of a candle beyond her. "They burned her, Janette, and she went into the fire believing... believing that she would live forever."

The English had built the scaffold so high that the executioner could not reach her to give her the customary coup-de-grace. And so she had burned...

"Nicki," Janette whispered, appealing to him one last time. "Don't leave me alone with LaCroix. Please..."

He closed his eyes, and did not reply. After a while, she left him.

And he was alone.

* * *

But not quite alone. When next he opened his eyes, the candles had been replenished, and LaCroix stood next to his bed, holding a small wooden panel. There was a funny, twisted smile on LaCroix's face, one Nicholas had never seen there, though he'd seen LaCroix's smiles and sneers in detail for two centuries.

"I can't seem to make an impression on you, can I?" LaCroix was asking him, his voice almost broken. "But I remembered you once liked this old thing," and he looked at the Coronation of the Virgin contemptuously. "So gaudy. I don't know what you see in it," LaCroix whispered. "But..." he stopped, and took a ragged breath. "You look at it for a while. Just look at it?"

He stopped again, then propped up the painting. He began to stand, then knelt by the low bed and placed his hand on Nick's bright hair for just an instant. Then he stood, looked silently at Nicholas, his mouth working, and departed.

Nicholas heard him leave. The candlelight glittered off the reds and blues of the robes of the saints in the painting. The image wavered, then was gone.

* * *

Nicholas, starving, drifted in and out of lucidity. He awoke at some unknown hour to find himself alone. He stared at the glowing candelabra on the table next to his bed, thinking that he would soon be too weak to carry out his plan. As he levered himself off his straw-stuffed pallet, and reached for the nearest candle, a movement caught his eye.

The painting next to his bed seemed to swim before his eyes. The figures in it were moving, turning their faces toward him accusingly. The Virgin's peaceful face turned toward him – but it was not the Virgin. Jehanne stood before him, dressed in the simple boy's clothing she had affected.

"What are you doing?" she asked him, giving him the unwavering stare he remembered so well.

"Following you into the fire," he replied, his hand tightening around a warm wax taper. He glanced down at his bed, with its fine linens, and the mattress crinkling with dry straw, thinking that it would burn quickly. A pyre to burn away his wickedness... "There's no reason to continue this existence – I know I'm a damned creature. I had might as well face my fate."

His mouth twisted, faintly, into a bitter grimace. "I failed you. At least I know I deserve my death. You were right, you know. I have lived so long because I fear death, and my judgement after death."

She stepped forward, and laid a warm hand on his stubbled cheek. "There is no one who has wandered so far that God cannot find him. I gave you my cross, Nicholas. Do you remember what I said then?"

The ghost of her voice echoed in the space between them: Take this to remember me by – and remember that the faith you've lost is always there to regain.

"But is it really?" he asked, afraid to hope.

"Renounce the Darkness, Nicolas de Brabant, and strive towards the Light for the salvation of your soul."

"Jehanne," he whispered, releasing the candle and cupping his hand around the warm touch on his face. "My soul... do I still have one?"

"Yes," she replied, with solemn kindness. Now he could see the faint glint of her armor under the boy's cloak. "But you must serve a long penance before it can be redeemed."

"Yes," he whispered. "Give me the penance. I want my soul back."

Jehanne smiled sadly. "You must find your own penance. Live, then, and serve my memory as a true knight."

She bent forward, and kissed his brow with a brush of warm lips, then stepped away from him.

"Thank you," said Nicholas. Then, helplessly, "Must you leave me?"

"Remember me, and I will not desert you, Nicholas de Brabant – and I will intercede for your soul."

And she was gone, leaving only the crowned Virgin to smile mysteriously at him in the wavering golden candlelight.

Nicholas tried to keep his eyes open, concentrating on the painting. He would live – for Jehanne's sake, and for the sake of his own soul. But weakened by his long hunger, he eventually drifted off to sleep again.

* * *

In the wavering candlelight of the wax tapers, LaCroix sat stiffly, watching his captive hawk wasting away. All his bright lures had failed, his careful feeding, training, all his kindnesses, spurned. He could not hold this wild creature to his glove, against its will to be free, the freedom that death might bring, he thought, despairing.

He reached for Nicholas's bright head again, but drew his fingers back before he touched him.

"Oh, Nicholas," he said, his voice raw. "My son." He took a deep breath. "I release you," and his breathing went ragged again. "I give you your freedom." He breathed harder. "But please, don't leave me alone." And he subsided into silence.

Nicholas heard his voice, dimly. The words he never had expected to hear came echoing as if in a vision. I give you your freedom. Could LaCroix have actually said that to him? LaCroix? He replayed the moment in his perfect memory.

I give you your freedom.

Yes, that was what he had said. He remembered Jehanne's command: *Renounce the Darkness, Nicolas de Brabant, and strive towards the Light for the salvation of your soul... you must serve a long penance before it can be redeemed.*

Yes, he had whispered. *Give me the penance. I want my soul back.*

Jehanne had smiled sadly. *You must find your own penance. Live, then, and serve my memory as a true knight.*

And he remembered the other words LaCroix had said, had whispered: *Please, don't leave me alone.*

He turned his head toward LaCroix, sitting so still, so stiff beside the low bed. LaCroix's face was shuttered tight, no emotions leaking untidily from behind his defenses. Nicholas saw him in the wavering candlelight, as still as one of the figures in his painting, and he understood what his penance had to be.

Oh, no, please, Jehanne, he begged the saint, in silent prayer. *Let this cup pass from me!*

But her voice was silent, except in memory. *You must find your own penance, Nicholas.*

Beside his bed, LaCroix waited.

Reluctantly, Nicholas opened his mouth, and whispered, for his voice was gone, lost to the ravages of his hunger days ago, "LaCroix, thank you."

LaCroix's head turned with a snap as he looked at Nicholas, still expressionless.

Nicholas forced himself to continue. "I won't leave you."

LaCroix's eyes closed in relief, and he sighed, his body losing that stiffness it had held for an uncountable time.

"But–" Nicholas whispered further "–only if you promise never to touch me in an unnatural fashion again."

LaCroix's hand brushed the bright hair. "I promise," he said, voice truly breaking now. "Only what pleases you. Just don't go away."

"I can't go anywhere," Nicholas said, his lips quirking wryly. "I'm too weak."

"You're just hungry," LaCroix replied. He was tearing the laced sleeve away from his arm. "Here," he said, proffering his wrist, "drink, and grow strong again."

Nicholas found his teeth would move after all. They sought the vein in LaCroix's wrist with avid instinct, and he tasted the ancient, smoky blood he had first fed upon two centuries ago. Then, LaCroix had made him swear an oath of fealty, one of many oaths he had foresworn.

Now, he had nothing to swear by but his own sense of honor.

The taste of the smoky blood in his mouth was powerful, and sweet. The only pictures he saw in the blood were images of LaCroix, loosing his hawk into the sky, glove open, golden jesses abandoned on the ground.

–The End–

Unholy Trinity

a Forever Knight poem
by Susan M. Garrett

Three soulless shadows stalk the streets;
The fair, the dark, the darker still,
Though not for outward aspect called,
But spirit, heart, and iron will.

The fair strives ever for the light.
A warrior soul, blood-stained and torn,
Though doomed to his forever night,
Fights still to reach and hold the dawn.

That darker-still invests his time
In torment, agony, and pain.
He conquers and seduces souls,
Possession's all in his domain.

The dark is caught betwixt/between,
Suspended in the shades of gray--
Entranced by love that's fair and strong,
Entranced by fear that leads astray.

Three soulless shadows stalk the streets;
The fair, the dark, the darker still,
The best and worst in dark and light,
In spirit, heart, and iron will.

In the Night, Cries

by Teleri Beaty

Part 1

"Schanke – you don't want to go in there."

Schanke looked at his partner, blocking the dark alleyway, with a frown creasing his high forehead. "Hey, Nick, have your liquid shakes finally turned your brains to mush? It's my job–"

Nick shook his head slowly. "It's another one of his, Schanke."

Schanke stiffened, his dark complexion flushing pale. The flashing lights danced eerily over his skin. "No, Nick–"

"I'm sorry, Schanke."

Schanke nodded and turned around. "So am I, Nick. So am I."

* * *

Nat stared at the body bag. "Again," she said quietly.

The vampire stood at the room's small window, staring out into the night. His jaw clenched. "Yes."

"Same way?"

"You mean discovery? Yeah. The body was dumped. Not killed on the spot, but brought there. Thrown out like a piece of garbage."

She swallowed heavily. She was tired. She was worn out, mentally and physically. She didn't want to touch the heavy plastic, didn't want to peel the skin away from the small body inside. She didn't want to hesitate over the zipper like a new voyeur. Not again–

But she had to.

She looked up. Her friend was watching her, artificial light painting his bright hair gold. His face was shaded green, though she couldn't tell if it was just a reflection off the walls or an indicator of his mood. She swallowed again, smoothing her facial muscles out into a mask--the first layer of protection she would use before touching the tiny corpse.

"All right, Nick, I've got it from here." She headed over to the counter to grab the file, pushing all thoughts of person from her mind. Right now it was only a job, only a slab of flesh on her table. It wasn't--

"Nat, are you sure?"

"Nick." She turned to look at him. "I know that you take these things badly. Go away."

"This one's not pretty--"

"Neither were you when you first showed up on this table. Now go away, Nick."

"Nat--"

"Nick. Leave."

He left, and she turned away from the softly-closed door to stare at the dark blot spilled over her table.

* * *

Grace looked up. "Hello, Detective Knight. What brings you here?"

"I saw the body, Grace, and I thought..."

"That Natalie would need some comfort?"

"Well... yes." He shrugged, rotating his shoulders slightly under his jacket. "It's another one of his, Grace."

She bit her lip. "The – the crazy one?"

"Yeah. Thank heavens the press don't know about him--"

"They don't know? How tight are you guys keeping it?"

"Very. We have to. If the details get out--"

The black woman closed her eyes. "I know." She breathed deeply. "Well, Detective, I hope that you catch him soon."

He turned back to the morgue, his body seeming to lean towards the closed door. "And Nat--"

"Will be fine," Grace said firmly. "She's – she's used to this."

"Grace," he said softly, "she's not ready for that. Not -- not that one."

"Give her more credit, Detective. She's already done--"

"I know, Grace. And I do. But I know Nat--"

"Not as well as you think you do." She turned back to her newspaper.

Nick stared back at the lab. Concentrating, he could only hear the zipper of the bag. Nothing else. He felt tense, uneasy.

But... Grace is right. She can handle it. Probably better than I. At least she – she's strong. She'll be fine.

He left quietly.

* * *

Inside the morgue, Nat held the zipper quietly for a moment, eyes closed, gathering her thoughts before she revealed the misshappen pearl this black oyster had to offer. There was always that moment before, when the mind hoped that something had changed -- that the life beneath was still there--

Once before, and only once, had that been true. And that -- her lips twisted slightly -- that had led her off the path of what was normal. That time... had given her hope.

She didn't dare wish that this one would be the same.

Pulling the zipper, she faintly heard the echoes around her, coming as if from a great distance. Her eyes could only focus on small areas at a time -- how the zipper teeth split apart, gaping open as if to spill secrets -- how her fingers, enclosed in the surgical gloves, seemed as pale as the flesh being revealed slowy, oh so slowly, as the light spilled into the shadows -- the remaining areas of flesh that were still whole and clean, that is--

And then the pitifully small bag was open, spilling its contents to her -- Her eyes couldn't take in the entire scene. She saw only bits of flesh with hair remaining on them oh, that's the scalp, strips of skin hanging in ribbons well, that's a finger, large areas of discoloured flesh well, that was trauma -- blunt -- probably... yes, sexual penetration as well--

And then the light caught on the few bits of hair that were still reasonably clean, making them shine bright gold.

Her mind shut down instantly, realizing that this was a child, a creature of her own species, and not some horribly mangled specimen given to her as a test; no, this had been a living, breathing, laughing young thing that had once been whole, not these scattered parts--

This was a child.

She slumped to the table, her hands running carelessly through her hair, pulling, grabbing heedlessly at something, anything--

This was the fourth one.

The tears fell onto the hard steel surface, shining like diamonds set in silver.

* * *

Nick approached Grace cautiously, his teeth nearly grinding in frustration. He hadn't slept well after last night, and his temper was nearly on the breaking point. He hoped Grace didn't try to do -- whatever she was doing. He wasn't in the mood. He'd nearly snapped off Schanke's head when Nick had gone into the precinct to check in, and he'd quickly figured that he needed to cool down. Take a rest.

Schanke, still trying to recover from last night -- he hadn't seen the body, but he'd been on the scene for the first two, and his imagination had run wild -- with Jenny in the starring role -- had understood his partner's anger. He'd backed off quickly. And when Schanke backed off, Nick thought ruefully, you knew you were being obvious. Schanke was as subtle as a brick wall.

Grace looked up from her desk, a frown on her face. Her fingers twitched over her report. "Detective?"

"I'm just here to see Nat for a sec. I won't be long."

Her hands fluttered nervously. "Detective -- she's not here." She pressed her hands together to stop their movement. "I--"

Nick felt a tremor slide through his legs. "Where is she?" His hands clenched, and he tried not to wrap his fingers around Grace's throat -- she was only doing her job, dammit, she didn't know what he was going through--

"I don't know. She hasn't come in. I tried calling her, but her machine picks up. I've called her at least five times in the past hour. I called the precint to see if she was with you; I thought maybe her car had broken down and you'd given her a ride. Schanke said you were coming over to see her." She looked down at her hands, knuckles pale. "I'm worried about her, Detective. She was still working when I left; she said something about trying to do a good job -- She looked like hell. I was worried about her, but she insisted that I go home."

She looked up. "Detective?"

The corridor was empty.

* * *

"Nat!" Nick ground out the words, barely keeping himself from screaming her name to the world. From releasing the anger he felt as he clutched her cold body -- "Nat!"

Still no response. She lay quietly in his grasp, limp and pale as a newborn child. When he'd seen her like this--

He closed his eyes and held her tighter within his arms, uncaring of what she should think if she opened her eyes -- how he wished she would open her eyes!

He'd flown over to her apartment, too uneasy to attempt to drive. He wouldn't have kept control of the Caddy, pressing it too hard and running lights in his haste to get to Nat, to find her, to--

So he'd flown.

He would have broken in a window, except that he knew how angry she'd be if she found out... and she would find out, too, because she's still there, watching reruns or something. She's probably sick with a cold, or something, and she'll hate me for showing up like this and seeing her when she's lounging. He smiled at the thought, trying to keep his hope.

The darkened windows hadn't helped much. He had stood in the doorway, listening for a heartbeat, any heartbeat -- praying that blood would be flowing and that it would flow for his sake.

Inside, nothing... until finally, he could hear a rhythm, low and nearly lost in the beat of the city around him.

He'd broken the lock of the door, promising Nat silently that he'd buy her a new lock. A new door, if she wanted. Anything.

Inside, nothing. His eyes had swept the living room, searching for signs of disarray -- but nothing. Only her purse on the living room table, her shoes in a path to her bedroom, as if she'd merely stepped out of them on her way to bed--

He had listened, and prayed, and finally opened the door, praying even more... and had cursed and thanked God in one breath.

Nat lay on the bed, still clothed, still above the covers. Stiff as a corpse, from the way her hands and elbows were bent. She was still alive, he knew; her heart muttered slowly in his head. Yet her body on the bed was pale and cold, and he'd gathered her up, wincing inside as he touched her clammy flesh, bent her limbs like a doll's. He had stripped her, carefully as any worried father, and wrapped her pale form in her large cotton bathrobe.

Now he held her, cradled her in his arms, wishing that he had some warmth to give her – some heat to share – and rubbing her arms, her legs, smoothing her hair as he would to any child, whispering in her ear.

"Come back, Nat. Come on back to me, Natalie. I'm here, Nat."

He held one of her hands against his chest, his larger hand over it. She was cold to the touch.

"Please, Nat," he whispered. "Come back to me."

* * *

That voice – where had he heard it before?

"Come back to me, Nicola. Come back to us."

A rustle, and the light tracing the patterns on Nicholas' eyelids shifted – seemed to scurry off, like mice before a cat.

A lower voice, deeper and thrumming with power. It hurt his ears, seemed to ring in his mind. "Well? Why isn't he with us yet?"

"It takes time, LaCroix!" The woman's voice was angry and high. "You insist on draining them so violently—"

"Are you complaining?"

Silence then, and Nicholas could hear the mice scurrying in the rushes scattered in the room.

"No, LaCroix."

"Good."

Then a light touch on his hair, someone stroking his face with soft, cold hands – he was so cold – and he felt someone close to him.

How?

He could hear something, *he wasn't sure what. It sounded like the castle drums beating –* but why would they be beating now? – *deep, sonorous, far-off.*

"He's back."

"Good. Another child--" The voice was rich with irony. "--is born." The larger shape drifted forward, brushed at the edges of Nicholas' mind. He flinched.

The figure... laughed. "Good."

Nicholas opened his eyes, blinded by the sudden rush of light flying in and piercing his brain. He tried to throw up his arm, block the light, but it was heavy... oh so heavy.

The dark-haired woman, Janette, laughed delightedly. "You're back with us, mon cheri!" *She clasped him lightly to her breast.*

Nicholas turned, instinct switching on, nuzzling not for her breast like a baby, but for her neck like the dark creature he'd become--

* * *

Nick nearly jumped with relief when Natalie moved slightly, shifting, her fingers closing spasmodically on his sweater, her cry muffled by the wool. He held tightly to her hand, feeling the pulse quicken beneath his fingers, her breath blowing over his knuckles.

"Nat?"

She mewled slightly, her eyelids twitching, her breath coming faster.

He touched her face carefully with his right hand. "Nat? It's me, Nick -- come back, Nat, it's all right."

Her lips moved, and he thought he caught a word -- he thought he heard his name. He tightened his left arm around her body, holding her against him, showing her that she wasn't alone. "Nat," he breathed.

Her lips moved again, and she groaned slightly. "Nick?"

"Nat, I'm here. Nat."

Her eyes opened, and she blinked fuzzily, dazed, pupils dilated. "Nick?" Her voice was light, confused.

"Nat, hold on a second -- I'll get you a glass of water--"

But when he moved, she held on to him tightly. He could feel the terror in her body, the fear at not being able to see, to focus... What the hell happened to her?

Finally he merely picked her up, easily carrying her with an arm around her waist and another under her legs. She clung to him for support, looking curiously at him.

Probably doesn't recognize who I am. He felt a curious rush of pain.

In the kitchen, he set her down lightly on the countertop, fumbling for the glass and filling it full of water with only one hand, the other constantly touching her, reassuring her. Nat stared around at the darkness of her living room, eyebrows furrowing as she tried to see into the night.

"Drink this."

He held the glass while she drank, watching the way her throat bobbed, drops of clear liquid spilling out the sides of her mouth and down her neck, hating himself.

She squeezed her eyes shut, breathing heavily. He watched her. "Nat?"

She looked at him, and he was relieved to see her pupils were back to normal size, her color was returning -- he could see her in her eyes.

"Nick?"

He backed off several paces, aware that the woman had once again come into her body, aware that Nat was... there. "Nat, we were worried. What happened?"

She frowned, blinking rapidly. "I... worked hard last night, Nick. I was tired." She glanced around. "I'm... surprised I made it home, actually... I don't remember driving. I knew I wanted to get home—"

"You barely made it, I think. It looked like you'd barely walked in before you crashed."

She looked down at her robe, but said nothing. "Crashed is probably a good word. How long have I been out? What time is it?"

"At least you didn't ask what century it is." Nick looked down at his watch. "It's nearly three in the morning."

"Oh! Why aren't you at work? What are you doing here?"

"You were missing, Nat. People were worried about you. Grace tried calling a few times--"

"I didn't hear."

"I know. You shouldn't work so hard. You're pushing yourself too much."

"So are you."

"It's my job."

"I could say the same thing."

He sighed. "Are you sure you're okay?"

She flicked her hair out of her face and pushed herself to the floor. Nick watched her carefully, but she did nothing more than wobble.

"I'm fine, I guess. It's just the stress -- it finally caught up to me, I guess."

"I'm sorry about last night."

"Hmmm?"

"The... boy."

"Oh, that." Her eyes lowered briefly. "It's not your fault, Nick. You couldn't do anything about it."

"I shouldn't have brought him to you. I should have asked for another one – this is the fourth one you've done already–"

"And it'll be the last one I do." Her voice was quiet. "Do you hear me, Nick?"

He stared at her.

"I don't want to do another one." She watched him. "Catch the man, Nick. Don't... let him do that again. Please."

He wanted so much to promise her– "I won't, Nat. I'll get him."

"Do it." She sighed, releasing him from her strange stare. "Now, get out of here."

He paused. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I've already grown up, Nick. I'm not the one in trouble."

He left, shutting the front door quietly.

* * *

Nat watched him leave, the blond hair glinting as he passed under the light outside her door. Her heart thumped.

If she hadn't known better, the child could have been his.

She looked backwards, back to the sterile morgue and the cold room, no place for a child. Only for bodies, emptied of soul and life.

The child was beautiful, even in death. Scarred and torn, discarded like a rag toy, he seemed to be peaceful, angelic. She had worked hard to give this one... respect. Ceremony. She had worked hard on all of them, but this one...

If she hadn't known better, the child could have been Nick's.

Part 2

"Partner! What'cha looking at?"

Nick frowned as he stared at the papers spread over his desk. "Reports, Schanke."

"Oh." Schanke sighed as he flopped into the chair opposite Nick's desk. "The kids?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah."

The other man traced coffee rings on the desk. "Hey, partner... Thanks." He swallowed. "For not having me go in to–"

Nick watched his partner. After the man's reaction the second time he'd been called onto the scene – Schanke hadn't been in to work the next day. Myra had called him in sick. "I understand, Schanke. I'm sorry."

"Yeah." Schanke looked at Nick, something shining in his eyes. "You know I went home that night and couldn't sleep? Kept on going into Jenny's room -- just to make sure. You know. Myra thought I was crazy. Couldn't understand why I... I just had to touch my baby girl. Know what I mean?"

Nick's throat tightened. "I... I think I do."

"Don't have kids, Nick. You worry about them so much -- you're always so afraid for them. That something will happen -- something's going to take them away from you." Schanke looked away. "I know I'm going to die sometime; everyone does -- but you always hope that your kids -- that your kids are somehow above that. You want to think they're invicible just as much as they do. Death is worse if it's a kid."

"Schanke--" Nick raised his eyebrows.

"I know, I know. It's just -- this scares me, Nick. I have my little girl to think about." He shifted in his chair. "I just wish... I wish that Jenny would live forever, Nick."

"No, you don't."

"Whatever. I just want... I want to die first. You know what I mean? I don't want to see my baby suffer. God isn't that cruel, is He? He wouldn't make me watch my kid suffer."

Nick shook his head. "I don't know, Schanke. I just don't know." He stared down at the report in his hand. Something hovered at the edge of his mind, teasing him, staying just out of reach--

Schanke shook his head and shifted his bulk, coming to stand behind his partner. "We don't know much, do we?" He glanced over the papers spread haphazardly over the usually clean surface of Nick's space. "What have you found?"

"Nothing. I've been reading the same things over and over for hours now." He sighed. "The bodies weren't killed on the spot they were discovered. Where were they killed? We don't know. The killer did a phenomenal job cleaning up after himself. So I tried to think of somewhere someone could stash a child long enough to... murder. Problem is, there are too many places. Good places."

"It would have to be a secluded place," Schanke pointed out. "I can't see any kid... not making a hell of a lot of noise while the guy did that -- that ... to him."

"True. And there's been no trace of tranquilizers in the bodies."

"Underground, you think?"

"Perhaps." The vampire closed his eyes, feeling something -- something...

"Hey, Nick -- what is it?"

Nick, eyes straining to reach past the papers and pierce the mind of a murderer, didn't even wince as the rank green smell of garlic floated past his nose. "I... I'm not sure."

Schanke watched his partner. "But you caught something. You were off in la-la land there--"

Nick lay the report down on the table and, steepling his fingertips under his chin, stared off into space. "It's just -- these facts." He frowned. "Something's not fitting."

"I checked them out already. Everything seems to fit." Schanke snorted. "Other than the complete lack of clues on the suspect. All of this modern technology, and people can't seem to find a single clue--"

"Nat's doing as much as she can, Schanke. More than she should."

"Yeah, I know. But... Nick, it's not enough."

"I know."

"You'd think that psychos like this would -- I don't know, leave clues or something. Prints. Drop a knife. Leave a few traces of dirt around. Something."

Nick stared at his partner. "What did you say?"

* * *

"I said," the older man murmured, pulling on his immaculately tended moustache, "that this murderer -- this psychotic -- seems as if he ought to leave some sort of clue." His cultured London tones barely pierced the fog around them. "It would be nice of him."

"Why?"

"My dear Nick," the Inspector looked up at the taller man, "this sort of killer is brutal. You can see that; you've pointed it out to me yourself. Now, how many people can kill with such ferocity and force, yet manage to keep their waistcoat clean? I haven't met any."

Not many men -- but more than a few vampires. *"Like a mad dog, Inspector?"*

"Much. And yet no mad dog to lose control. No, those poor women were killed as he meant them. Our Jack is quite the clever man, he is. Fast worker, quick to clean up after himself, and even leaves us little presents. Wonder if he's an artist." He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his greatcoat, the gaslight under which they stood throwing his lean features into sharp relief. "Bloody bastard."

"Bloody is right."

"So, you do have a sense of humour." On the Thames, a ship drifted by, creaking and groaning as it stumbled through the dark thick night. The two men heard the muted call of a foghorn. The Inspector smiled. "Here I thought you were making a career of being grim."

"Only when... hunting."

"How sad. It's often the murderers who've the best sense of humour, you know."

Not always. *"Why?"*

"Must be something about blood -- the power of killing someone. Our Jackie ought to be entertaining. He's got quite a sense of humour, showing us his wonderful collages."

About as nice as LaCroix. *"When we get him, you can ask him."*

"If we get him."

"You've doubts?"

The Inspector smiled genialy. "I'm human, Nick. Of course I have doubts. Don't you?"

"We'll catch him."

"Ah, the arrogance of youth. My boy, when you've been in the business as long as I, you don't presume anything. But you've still years ahead of you, I suppose."

"Yes."

"You'll learn."

"Mmmmm."

"That's what you want, isn't it? To learn the ropes, perhaps become an inspector yourself?"

"I suppose."

The Inspector pulled a pipe from his pocket and examined it carefully. "Why are you here, Nick?"

Nick's fingers clenched spasmodically in his pockets. "What do you mean, Inspector?"

"You're slumming, my friend. I'd like to know why. Call it curiosity, if you will."

Nick watched him carefully. "Why do you think that, Inspector?"

"Oh, come now. Give me some credit for my powers of observation; others certainly do." His eyes looked Nick up and down quickly. "You've a nice modern cut to your clothes, you carry yourself well, your manners are impeccable... All in all, a nice sort of chap who shouldn't be out here. You come from the old school of aristocracy, Nick."

The vampire didn't blink. "You could say that."

"A man approaches me one night, leads me to a body, tells me it seems like our murderer -- he hadn't been named Jackie then -- has struck again, then disappears. The next night I turn around and there he is, asking me about the case. Which, I pointed out in my job as civic protector, was really none of his business. He tells me, however, that he thinks he can help me, and for some odd reason, I believe him." The Inspector shifted slightly from one foot to another. "I begin to let him accompany me to the scenes of the crime -- not very lawful, but then, Jackie's not a lawful sort either." The Inspector carefully knocked the ashes from the bowl of his pipe, his eyes on the smooth wood. "It's been two weeks, Nick. I'm curious." He looked up and caught sight of Nick's face. "You're not going to explain?"

"I don't see why I should. I've helped you. Isn't that all that matters?"

"Oh, yes. In the grander scheme of things. But I'm curious, Nick; it's my job." He walked around Nick slightly. "See it from my point of view, my friend. I'm approached by a man who isn't what he seems -- yes, I checked, my lad, and there are no night-clerks by the name of Nicholas Watson in the city." The Inspector polished the pipe on his sleeve.

"You said nothing of this to me. Why? Even after you found out I was not who I said, why?"

"I was curious. My friend, you are uncanny at spotting what my eyes miss. Your way of thinking is simply extraordinary. I knew I couldn't let you go, Nicholas Watson – or whoever you are. You are woefully inadequate at police procedure – no great suprise; you haven't been taught, after all – but I find myself wanting to teach you."

Nick stared at the older man in shock. "Excuse me?"

"You have... an astounding nose, young man. Almost a nose for a crime, if you'll pardon the phrase. Only through your help have I gotten this close to our Jackie." He paused. "My friends think me quite marvelous now. They don't know about you, really, just that I've taken in an old doctor with a common last name. I thought I'd throw them off the track a bit, should they ever meet you."

"Good."

"I suspected as much. However, when this affair is over, I shall want to keep your sharp wit beside me."

"I – I don't understand."

"It's elementary, my dear Watson. You're quite the man for this job."

* * *

"And you're the perfect guy for this job."

Nick looked up guiltily. "What, Schanke?"

"I said, Nick, that if anyone can catch this guy and bring him in, you can. You've surprised me before, partner. Do it again." Schanke shook himself slightly. "Heaven help me, I'm so scared for Jenny. If I ever meet the man, Nick, there's no court of law that can keep me from killing him."

"Schanke, don't--"

"I can't help it, Nick. I can't." The darker man shook his head. "I can't even say to myself, 'Well, this guy only likes only the homeless kids or the poor or the rich, and so Jenny's safe.' Nick, this is a serial murderer with no pattern except his MO and choice of victims -- slice and dice the tender ones. He leaves no clues, he doesn't seem to have preferred victims except for kids --I can't even comfort myself with that. And the next one may not be Jenny – but some father out there is still going to lose his child." He swallowed heavily. "It doesn't matter who's kid it is, Nick. It's still a kid. And I don't think there's a parent alive who wouldn't want him stopped."

One of the lieutenants walked by and overheard their comments. He snorted. "Well, the press agree with you," he said sourly.

Both the detectives turned to him. "What do you mean, Johnson?" Schanke demanded.

"Look at today's paper. The mayor's calling the Captain, furious. Seems we had a leak last night, and now the entire city knows about our Jackie."

Nick felt a jolt of electricity crack through his body. "Our what?"

"Our Jackie." The lieutenant shrugged angrily. "After that last kid, everyone's saying that we've got another Jack the Ripper. Only this one likes little kids."

Part 3

Nick gulped at the cool night air, trying to wash the stink of violence from his lungs. He had smelled death before, had tasted it on his lips, had drank it in... but never like this. That last one -- the room had been so stuffy, so... dead. Just like the occupant, who lay gored on the bed.

Her head had been on the pillow beside her.

When Nick had found the first body, his interest had been only in stopping the vampire who would do such a thing. He wanted to avoid the Enforcers that he believed were coming and find the rogue himself. But now that he'd seen what the killer did--

I was wrong. This isn't one of my kind. No vampire would ever waste that much blood. This Jack -- he loves the blood, he bathes in it -- he loves their dying more than their death.

Now he, Nick, wanted to stop the killer.

The Inspector touched him gently on the arm. "Feeling all right, Watson?"

"Better." He took another deep breath, ignoring the smell of fetid waste rising from the gutters. This was London, after all. "And... this one?"

"Missing some of her rather precious parts, I'm afraid." The older man sighed. "Bloody rich bastard. So greedy that he took her life, too."

The younger man frowned. "Rich? Sir -- how do you know? Can you tell? Did he leave a clue?"

"No clue, Watson, other than that of lack of clues."

"What do you mean?"

The Inspector rubbed his large, beaklike nose carefully. "Hmmm... Well, she wasn't robbed. Her bedroom still has quite a few trinkets in it that would have gone for a few pounds. So the motive wasn't money."

"That doesn't mean the killer's wealthy."

"No... Nick, look around you."

The younger man did so. "Yes?"

"What do you see?"

"Err... Tenement houses. Garbage. Darkness."

"Nick, these people are poor. They're too poor to be worrying about killing; they're too concerned with surviving themselves. Why would one of them bother to kill a few whores?

No, lad, this murderer is quite wealthy." He snorted sardonically. "Apparently became bored with his other hobbies."

Nick looked away. "That's... sad."

"Very. But so is this life, Nick."

"I shouldn't want to live here."

"Have you been here before? To this end of London?"

"No, sir."

"You're getting quite the tour of London then, my friend," the Inspector observed, glancing around curiously. "Along with some of the city's... little perks."

"Yes." Everywhere Nick looked, the shadows welled over like blood. "Why would someone do that, sir? Why would someone be..."

"So cruel?"

"Yes."

"To prove to us he can."

Nick looked back at the Inspector. "What?"

"He's showing off, Nick. All that he's done -- it's for us. He wants us to see his handiwork." A muscle jumped in his jaw. "He's teasing us. Telling us that he's better than us. Daring us to catch him."

"How can you tell? The brutality?"

"Oh, no. He would do that anyway, I suspect. But his little collages -- they're his card, so to speak. He's telling us he was there. He wants us to know that he *did it, not another random murderer. He's flaunting his cleverness."*

"By preying on the weak?"

"Easy prey, my friend. The hunters of the night prefer them."

"True."

"We'll need to look around again, I'm afraid. Ready to go back in?"

The vampire glanced cautiously at the Inspector. "Holmes, sir... We?"

The older man smiled. "Yes, Nick. We." He slapped the younger man genially on the shoulder before turning to go back into the tainted room. "You've the makings of a good one, Nick."

* * *

"Why children?"

Nat glanced at Nick. "Hmmmm?"

Nick sighed. Two weeks he'd been on this case, and all he had to show for it were four dead children. Rather, pieces of four dead children.

Papers lay scattered over his coffee table. He'd even brought some of the reports home, going over them during the day, trying to find something, anything, that he'd missed. Natalie had brought some of hers over, and they'd brainstormed.

"Why does he kill only children? Why not women? Or other men?"

"He might be a small man," she muttered, glancing back down at her reports. "Or perhaps slightly built. Weaker. Something." She shrugged. "You ought to know by now, Nick, that you don't attack people stronger than yourself."

"Why not women?"

She smiled at him pointedly. "We're just as likely to know how to defend ourselves nowadays, buddy. Or have little suprises in our purses. It's been eight hundred years, Nick; give us a break. We've learned, buster."

"So children--"

She nodded. "Are weak. And he takes advantage of that."

"Bloody bastard."

She said nothing. There was nothing to say.

"Nat, would you like something to drink? Eat? You've still got some things left in the fridge—" He hoped that she'd say yes, giving him something to do—

She mumbled under her breath.

"What?"

"I said, no thanks."

He stumbled off the couch and crawled to her chair on his hands and knees. She didn't even look up. He hung over the arm of the chair and glanced at what she was reading.

"Nat, those are the morgue reports from the kids."

"And?"

"What are you doing?"

"Looking."

He tried to catch her gaze. "Nat, what are you doing?"

She shot him a look from the corner of her eyes. "Trying to see if there's anything I missed."

He could see the circles under her eyes, the bloodshot whites, the slightly dilated pupils... "Yeah. About fourteen hours of sleep."

"Rather that than another kid."

"I know. But you can at least take a break."

"You can take your own advice."

"Nat--"

"Nick, I can help you." Her voice was quiet, sure.

"Like this?"

She pushed a piece of paper over to him. "Here. It's a list of the similarities of the victims. The one under it is the differences. Here's my map of the city -- don't look so suprised, Nick; I know what to look for. The dots in red are where we found the bodies. Now, since they were dumped, not killed on the spot, it might not mean much. I don't know if any of this will help, but I figured I'd give it a shot." She pointed out several lines. "I've underlined a couple of my notes -- they're odd. They seem to be... I don't know. Familiar."

"You, too?"

"Me, what?"

He frowned. "I've been getting feelings of *deja vu* since this affair began."

She snorted. "You've probably lived long enough to see it before."

Something was niggling in the back of his mind.

"Anyway, Nick, here's what I found when I did the autopsies. Facts and speculation added."

He frowned. What was it?

Nat sighed. "They were all still in primary school, too..."

That was it.

Nick scrabbled through the reports on the coffee table, searching for the page on which he'd doodled absently, trying to find patterns.

Aha. Here we go.

He skimmed down the page. Here he'd compared the similarities in the victims' economic status... *Yes.*

He compared the two lists. Each child had gone to a public school -- and though they lived far apart geographically, the schools were each within five kilometres of each other. And though all had gone to public schools, one came from a wealthy family, two from white-collar middle class, and one from blue-collar parents.

It wasn't the family, it was the schools.

That was the pattern. That was how he picked his victims.

On the second page, though... There was the proof he needed.

Each victim had organs removed. One had been found decapitated. Each had been slashed repeatedly...

Someone had done their homework.

"Nick, what is it?"

Nick stared off into space, into the centuries past time. *I'll best you this time, Jack. Oh, I'll get you this time... whoever you are.*

* * *

The Inspector wandered over to the edge of the dock. Nick slipped out of the shadows and joined the older man in his contemplation of the murky Thames.

The Inspector sighed heavily. "Did you get a good look at the last one?"

"Yes."

"And to imagine--" The Inspector looked around, an odd catch in his voice. "To imagine that this London night harbours such a brutal creature."

He and many more.

"I wonder... what the darkness hides, Nick. Do you ever wonder?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"Because... it compares as nothing to the darkness in my soul."

The Inspector touched him gently on the shoulder. "My friend, there is darkness in all men's souls. That... that is why we strive for the light. To drag ourselves out of the darkness in our hearts. To redeem ourselves." He paused. "Don't give up, Nick."

Nick shook his head. "No, sir... I won't."

* * *

Nick ran into the coroner's office. "Nat!" His voice echoed eerily down the corridors. "Nat!"

His footsteps rang as he raced down towards the morgue, hoping--

When the door opened inwards, he knew.

Grace was standing, holding a pale Natalie in her arms. Natalie was stiff and pale, her eyes fixed--

The bodybag lying on the examining table was a whirlpool of darkness.

Nick shoved it out of his mind and, panting heavily, skidded to a stop in front of the coroner and touched her face gently with one trembling hand. "Nat?"

"Nick." Her eyes were on him, vacant. "They brought me another one. Again."

"Yes." He smoothed back her hair. "Nat, I'm sorry--"

Suddenly her pupils contracted. "I know, Nick," she said softly. "I know." She gently disengaged herself from Grace's arms, smiling sadly at the worried nurse. "Don't worry, Grace -- I'm all right."

"No, you're not," the other woman said stoutly.

Nat was already at the bodybag, her back towards the two. "You're probably right," she murmured absentmindedly. "But that's not important."

"Nat," Nick interjected, "you've been pushing yourself too hard--"

"And you haven't?"

"I can get away with it." He glanced sideways at Grace. "Insomniacs always can."

"Ah... of course."

Grace looked from one to the other. "I'll... be outside. If you need me. Just call, okay?" She gave them a worried look before leaving.

"Nat?" Nick noticed she was stroking the bodybag softly, gently... almost as if petting a small creature.

"This one was a girl, Nick."

"I know. I heard -- over the radio. I couldn't get to the scene in time--"

"Yeah. The sun was still up when we found her."

He came to her side. "Are you sure you're okay?"

She looked at him, and he saw the tears spiking her lashes with diamonds. "I've always wanted children, Nick," she said softly.

"I know."

Her hands were still touching the heavy material of the bag. "I've always thought that someday -- someday I'd be a parent. Have my own child." She smiled sadly. "I've always wanted... to tuck them in. Have them under my care. Feel like... I was protecting them, you know?"

Nick pulled her into his arms and tucked her head under his chin. Her soft words, spoken almost wonderingly, were ripping at his heart. He felt his eyes flooding, clouding his vision with red mist.

"And now -- and now I get to tuck them in, Nick, but... it's not the same. I'm tucking them in forever, not for a night. They're hurt, and I have to piece them back together -- it's like doing a puzzle, Nick,

like putting together a child -- and I'm supposed to tuck them in forever?" She shuddered. "Can't I just -- shake them, and wake them up? Why do I have to tuck them in?"

"Nat..." He didn't know what to say. He, too, wanted children...

They held each other then, taking comfort in each other's pain. They held each other, and as Nat's tears fell onto Nick's shirt, red streaks painted lines from his face to hers, binding them in their mourning.

* * *

He entered the morgue at the end of his shift, stopping only to pick up any reports that might be useful. Tired, worn, and no closer to finding the killer, he was utterly unprepared to find Natalie, hands shaking, hesitating over the girl's -- over the body.

"Nat -- what are you still doing here? Shift's over -- time to go home and let the day crew take over."

She shook her head. "No -- just a little longer, Nick. I'll be home whenever. I just need -- to say goodbye."

"You need to go home now, Nat. You're a mess. What do you think you're doing?"

She turned to look at him, and he was struck by the loss in her eyes, the delirium of being cast into a sea of blood-soaked emotions.

"I don't -- I -- Nick--"

He resisted the urge to rip her gloves from her hand. "Why, Nat? Why are you working yourself so hard? Why don't you just go home and rest?"

Her face crumpled.

"Nat, Nat," he crooned, moving to hold her, "we'll get another coroner to do this job. It's okay. We'll get one of the day-shift ones--"

"It won't matter, Nick!" She pulled away angrily, shunning his comforting touch. His painful touch. Didn't he realize? "It won't matter," she said harshly, her voice echoing off the sterile walls, mocking them. "She'll still be here, cold and alone."

He grabbed her, held her, staring quietly into her eyes. "She's dead, Nat. Don't make this more than you can handle -- she's dead, she's passed over. She's gone -- it doesn't matter anymore."

Nat stared at him. "It doesn't matter?" she whispered. Nick could see the anger rising in her eyes, a deadly, cold, wounded anger that crawled up her throat.

"But you're dead, Nick. And you're not alone."

Part 4

Janette smiled coyly at him, one hand cupping a wine glass half-filled with rich, red liquid. Around her, the club was closing down. "It's good to see you, Nicola."

He walked past her and took a seat at the emptied bar. "Glad someone thinks so."

She cocked an eyebrow as she walked back towards him, her smile dying. "Ah. I see." She took a last sip of her drink and set the glass on the counter. When he said nothing, she gave him an icy stare. "Once again, Nicola, you come to see me only because you need something, yes?" Her eyes flashed. "So, what is it you need this time? Information? News? Tell me, so that I shall not take up so much of your valuable time."

"Janette, don't do this." His voice was low and tight.

Hers could cut steel. "Why not, Nicola? Your coroner is making you jump through one too many hoops, perhaps? Or maybe you're just too tired?" She turned away. "Too bad."

He moved so quickly she was caught by suprise. Nick had lashed out of his seat and was behind her, hurting her. Pain shot up her arm as he forced the arm lock tighter. She grimaced.

"Janette, my dear... I have had... a very bad week."

She froze.

He sounded just like LaCroix.

"I... can see that," she said carefully. She felt him take a deep breath. "Nicola... you're hurting me."

His fingers stroked her arm as he gently released her. "Janette... I'm sorry -- I don't know what to say—"

She turned slowly and faced him, her anger drained away. His eyes were sad, so sad, and weary. Guilty. He watched as her hand rose, and he closed his eyes as she gently smoothed down the lines of his face with her fingertips. He leaned into her caress, sighing. Her skin was cool on his forehead.

"Nicola -- what's wrong? Is this personal, or business?" She looked into his eyes. "Nothing has happened to your coroner, yes?"

"It's all of the above. And more." Nick ran a hand through his hair, ruffling it wildly. "It was business; now it's personal. Nat's included..." He closed his eyes. "Another child was killed last night."

She closed her eyes. "No."

He wasn't suprised that she knew about the murders. "I'm no closer to finding him -- I've gotten several leads, thanks to Nat, but she's driving herself to exhaustion. Schanke's no use to me; he's had nightmares about his daughter being a victim... and I can't seem to... to get a fix on this man. This killer."

"Those poor children..." Janette whispered brokenly. "Nicola... the killer... he's not one of us, is he?" Her voice sharpened. "He's not... ours, cheri?"

"No. Not that it matters to the children."

"No." She held him tightly, dropping her usual cool reserve to touch him with muted grief.

"I can't look at them, Janette. I can't... bear to see... what he's done to them. What... I failed them, Janette."

"Nicola, you have not failed! You could not have forseen their deaths. As much as you desire, Nicola, you are not their father, to protect them."

Nicholas gingerly tested his jaw. It was swelling, puffy, he'd bet, even while healing with his new-found powers. He didn't know how long it would take to fully heal; LaCroix had dealt him quite a blow and he wasn't yet experienced at judging this other world. He clenched his teeth, eyes boiling at the man towering above him, the light making his hair seem to catch fire. The older vampire was ready to strike him again should he try to stand. "You are not *my master. You have no rights over me."*

"I have every *power over you, Nicholas. Even that of life or death." LaCroix had stilled, become cold as marble. "I am your master in this world. You have no say here in the night." He smiled coldly. "I am your vampire father, Nicholas, your sire. Your master. You are* nothing. *I must be your life now; you can never leave me. Do you understand, my son? You can never leave me."*

"I have a father already," Nicholas spat out.

LaCroix sneered. "No, the foolish young knight had a father. You... have me."

Nicholas shook his head, cursing inwardly as it began to throb. "No," he muttered. "No."

LaCroix knelt by the young vampire. "Yes, my son," he hissed. "Yes." He smiled, fangs bared, and reached for Nicholas–

Nicholas screamed as his world turned first to blood, and then to darkness.

* * *

Natalie grabbed at the countertop as her world turned to darkness. No. No. Have to keep on working – not finished yet. Have to make sure – make sure she's... okay.

Her vision cleared gradually, strength seeping back into her legs, and Natalie could once again see that tiny corpse, the small face that had dominated her life for two long nights–

She frowned. From her angle, bent over the examination table, she could see light slanting into the remains of the child's nose. Yet something was different–

She grabbed one of the q-tips from the drawer to her right without looking and inserted it carefully into the nostril.

It came out black.

* * *

Hours later, she sighed and straightened up. Her eyes ached from peering into the microscope, and her back creacked audibly. She ignored it. She felt tired, old... and curiously at peace.

They were close.

She picked up the phone and dialed. Her eyes never left the body still on the table, reclined as if in sleep. If it hadn't been for the missing pieces, she would have thought the child was sleeping, so peaceful she looked. The coroner's eyes were steady on the small girl.

The victim's name had been Natalie.

Someone picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Nick?"

"Yeah. Nat?" Questions went unsaid. He settled for non-committal. "Are you okay?"

"Nick, could you come over? I've got something to show you--"

* * *

He stared at her. "It's what?"

"Gunpowder." She stared at the sample bemusedly. "It's honest-to- God gunpowder."

"How did it get in her nose?"

"I don't know. She must have breathed it in."

"Where," Nick said slowly, "did she find enough gunpowder to breathe in?"

Nat glared at Nick. "I don't know, Nick! Give me a break, will you?"

He hesitated, moved as if to hold her. "Nat, I'm sorr--" *For everything.*

She cut him off. "Forget it, Nick. You're tired, I'm tired. We say things we don't mean, we move on, and together we get this guy. Okay?"

He nodded slowly. "Bad dreams again last night?"

She ran a nervous hand through her hair. "I'm sure I would have had them, if I'd slept. But -- forget it, Nick. We've got to get down to business."

"Yes."

"Good. Now." She took a deep breath. "We have to think of places that would have gunpowder in them -- a storage room or something -- and that fits the other parameters."

"Hmmm..." Nick began to pace, and suddenly Nat felt as if the room had shrunk. "I don't know. Some kind of shooting range? They're usually soundproofed if they're indoor, and outdoors... It would be out of the way."

"No," she shook her head, "that doesn't feel right. They're usually well-locked. And the composition of the gunpowder was... odd. How about a fireworks company?"

"Only the professionals keep that much, manufacturing for official use on holidays. And that would be well-guarded." He shrugged his shoulders uneasily. "We can rule out police ranges."

"Yeah."

"So. Where else would someone store large amounts of gunpowder, and still have enough space around to murder a screaming child and get away with it?"

Nat frowned. "Nick--"

"Hmm?" He turned to find her staring off into space. "What?"

"You ought to know. You've lived there -- sort of."

"Where?"

"The nineteenth century, Nick." She turned to him. "Black Creek Pioneer Village, over in Downsview. The recreated village. They've got gunpowder--"

He pivoted in mid-stride. "I'm going."

"I'll go with you."

"No!" He turned on her. "You stay here. Go to sleep, Nat! Get some rest!"

"I can help you!"

"I'll be worried sick about you!"

She paused and stared at him. "Then go, Nick," she whispered. "Go."

He left before she could change her mind.

* * *

They died here. He looked around the storeroom, eyes taking in the disarray. It hadn't taken too long to find the correct warehouse; his senses had led him to the spot that blotted out the natural black of the night. When the crews came in here to ready for the March opening, they would find quite a suprise. His nose could smell the dried blood over everything. Five of them -- and they died right here.

He knelt down and touched one of the brown splotches covering the floor. "Whoever you are, Jack," he whispered, "I'm going to get you."

* * *

"I'm going to get him."

The Inspector raised his eyebrows. "You are?"

"Aren't you?"

"I hope so. However, I shall not make it personal."

"After all he's done?"

"Yes."

"Why? He's hurt everyone! Those he hasn't killed he's made afraid --"

"Watson, I am an officer of the law," he said quietly. "I do not make it; I simply enforce it. When I am on duty, I follow the law, and not my own feelings, whatever my romantic friends may think of me."

"Yes, but--"

"No. If you wish to be the law, Nick, you must first decide whose law you will follow. If it is your own... then this conversation is moot. If you follow the laws of man and God, however... then you must become merely an executioner of the law, not its maker."

Nick nodded slowly. "I... understand, sir."

The older man turned to his paper, one hand patting down his mustache. "Excellent."

Nick glanced out the window. "At least the courts will find him guilty."

"If the courts find him."

"You should be more confident, sir. We've nearly got him."

"Oh?"

"We've narrowed down where he must live, sir. A few nights of watching, and sooner or later he'll strike--"

"Perhaps," the Inspector murmured, shifting his attention back to his paper.

Nick paced around the small library. They had retired early that night, tired from their hunting, and Holmes had invited Nick back to his flat. "And when we get him--"

The older man put down his paper with a sigh. "Nick, my friend... we haven't caught him yet."

"But we will!"

"I shan't count my criminals until they're locked away, my young friend."

"I want to look into his eyes."

"To do what? See what you'll find there?"

"Yes. To know what would make a man do such a thing--"

The Inspector stared quietly at Nick. "Look into a mirror, my friend, and see what you find there. You'll have your answer." He turned back to his paper. "You'll find it in the hearts of all men."

* * *

Nick froze. He thought he'd heard something--

After three nights on stakeout, he wanted to hear something.

He tensed the muscles in his legs. He was nervous, he was stiff, and he was tired. And he was hearing things. He wondered where Schanke was. His partner was supposed to patrol the village while Nick remained in the storeroom.

He heard the noise again.

Then the door exploded inward.

Nick jumped, unable to help himself. Then he growled, low, under his breath. His superior night vision showed him, all too plainly, what he didn't want to see.

A man had kicked open the door, obviously familiar with the fact that the wooden door was only loosely latched. In both hands he carried a struggling wide-eyed girl, perhaps seven years old, who writhed against the duct tape binding her, making terrified noises into her gag.

In the man's hand was a large knife, sharp. It was a fillet knife, long and thin.

He deposited the girl on the floor, roughly dropping her. Nick winced. The man turned to shut the door, snapping on the light as the door closed.

Schanke, where are you?

Nick waited until the man had stepped away from the girl before quietly standing up, pulling out his gun, and stepping out from behind the crates. "Metro Police. Put down your knife." He fought to keep his voice steady.

The man turned quickly, suprised. The shock in his eyes quickly turned to hatred.

Nick moved his gun slightly, letting the light gleam along the muzzle. Anger ate away at him as he watched the child out of the corner of his eyes, rocking to and fro desperately. "Don't make me do it," he said quietly.

* * *

"Don't make me do it," the man whispered to Nick, his voice low and menacing. A hunter sure of his prey. He'd stepped out of the shadows of the Bridge long enough to sieze the Inspector--

Nick stood frozen, watching the Inspector's face as the knife at his throat bit lightly into his flesh. The vampire's hair was whipped wildly about by the gusts that swept across the darkness, clouding the night over with fog. "Jack! Don't do it!"

The murderer laughed harshly. "Why not? I've got me some copper here, and I want to see if their blood flows as freshly." Blood seeped out of the cut in Holmes' neck and dripped over Jack's fingers. A few drops spilled to the road beneath, swept carefully to the ground by the wind coming across the bridge. "I like blood," the killer whispered in the Inspector's ear.

"I can tell," the older man shot back drily.

He earned a slice across the jaw for his wit.

Nick saw the pain cross the Inspector's face. "Jack! Listen to me!"

How did I let this happen? Why wasn't I paying more attention to what the Inspector was telling me? He told me to watch him, just like he would watch me. Why did I think I knew better? Why didn't I run fast enough to catch up when I knew someone was there?

He remembered the Inspector's ironic words. "You're still young, Nick."

And now he'll pay the price—

Jack laughed. "As soon as I'm finished with the Inspector, here, I'll have you."

Nick stepped forward, trying to grab the knife, grab the killer's arm—

A sickening crack then, and Nick stared down at the torn body of the Inspector, blood flooding the bridge. No. He can't be dead. *He was such a clever man -- he knew Jack would be here, figured it out by himself* -- No. He can't be dead!

"I broke his neck." The man smiled. "He was lucky. I didn't have time to do him proper. But you—" He sneered. "Run, little boy. Run for your life."

Nick fought back the Hunger, searching to replace the grief he felt with anger -- I could never taste his blood -- I'd feel dirty for decades after.... No!

"I have no life," he said coldly.

"Not after this, no," the killer laughed. "I'll take your life."

Nick smiled cruelly. "It's too late for that." He felt his fangs slide down. He wouldn't feed, but he would kill. He would emulate the master, and Jack's body would never be recognized -- if the authorities even found all of the pieces— "And now," he said quietly, "it's too late for you."

* * *

"It's too late," Nick said quietly. "Just... give yourself up."

The man grinned, lips twitching. "I don't think so, buddy," he growled, grabbing for the child at his feet.

Nick shot him before the man had moved a meter.

* * *

"You got him."

Nick and Nat walked through an empty park, each one tired and worn. The shadows circling the trees nested in their eyes. They were spent. Nick had filled out his reports, Nat had done the autopsy on the killer.

"Yes. Jack the Ripper is finally dead."

"Again."

"Again."

She sighed. "That's good. This time, at least, we know he's dead."

I knew the last time, too.

They passed an empty playground, the swings moving as if ghosts still played at their games. Nat paused and looked over the empty area.

Nick moved over and touched her lightly on the shoulder. "Nat?"

"I just wish – I wish we'd gotten him sooner, Nick."

"I know." He slid an arm around her shoulders and held her close. "I know, Nat."

She shuddered against his jacket. "I just wish – I didn't want to let them go, Nick. I didn't want to condemn them to a life underground. They should be up here, playing, laughing. Instead I've put them to bed forever. I've put them away."

Nick swallowed heavily. "You helped them, Natalie. You loved them last... and then you let them go. They went to a better place, Nat."

"Yes." She sighed against him, relaxing slowly, her head moving up and down. "I let them go." She glanced up at him. "But Nick... I'll remember. I'll never forget." She paused. "I loved them, Nick."

He touched her face gently. "I know."

-- The End --

The Vampire As Public Servant

by Susan M. Garrett

After reading a variety of descriptions of what happens when our favorite blood suckers 'vamp out', this appeared. (What can I say, I was driving at the time.)

Vampires eyes, I've heard it said,
Are amber, green, or sometimes red
(Which color, though, is really true
Depends upon your TV hue).
What public servants they could be
If vampire eyes could shine ALL THREE . . .

To think of costs that we could save
In traffic lights beyond the grave;
There'd be no large electric bill
For light or energy, but still . . .
The flashing red of vampire eyes
Might cause some motorists surprise.

So, accidents might well decline
If vampire traffic kept in line
And motorists knew the undead
Had penalties for running red.
A paltry wage would be their right—
A nip, a slurp, a sudden bite,
With taxes taken out, of course—
The laws of traffic they'd enforce.

We'd start with rural roads, at first
(They'd fill a minor vampire thirst),
Then move to streets and motorways
(Where current lights could work the days).
Till all vampires would be employed;
Their unions would be overjoyed!

A trial run might be the thing
To test this civil servant ring.
But should you hold this dream defective,
We've started with . . . a vamp detective!

(Sorry. It's Monday.)

A Novel Idea
by Susan M. Garrett

Nick paused just inside the door to the Raven. His eyes automatically and instantly adjusted to the change, but he needed the seconds to compose himself, to get his temper under control. Janette had instigated more than a few spectacular intrigues in her time, but he wasn't certain that he'd be able to forgive her for this one. Maybe it would be better for him to walk it off, calm down, before facing her.

Then again, if he didn't face her now, he never would.

She was sitting at the bar, sipping at a glass that could have been wine. She alternated her sips with drags from a cigarette in an ornate holder, her eyes covered by very expensive and very dark sunglasses. To any but the practiced eye, Janette looked the picture of distinction, a self-assured, alluring businesswoman, keeping an eye on the club and the clientele. But Nick knew many of her dirty little secrets. And now he was about to confront her with one so disturbing, the implications horrified even him.

Her eyes met his across the smoke and distance of the dance floor. He strode toward her like a man possessed, pushing aside the dancers that dared to stray into his path. Few were brave enough to protest and even fewer protested again after their outrage was met with a sudden, brutal snarl.

She turned the stool toward the bar as he approached. When he tossed the paperback onto the bar, sliding it within her reach, she barely glanced at it. "Nicola," she said smoothly, "you appear to be in an unpleasant mood."

"I found that on Natalie's desk, at work."

Her eyelids barely flickered. Between drags from the cigarette, Janette glanced down at the book. "One wouldn't have expected such a taste in literature from your Doctor Lambert."

"It's *us*." Nick tapped the cover of the book with his finger. "You and me."

The comment earned the book a second look. A smile snaked across her lips, but she still wouldn't look at him. "I appreciate the compliment, but I have never been *that* well endowed." She tilted her sunglasses down from her eyes, glazing coyly at him over the top of the frames. "And you were never *that* blond."

He dismissed the relative physical charms of the woman on the book cover with a wave of his hand. "Not that. The *story*. The story is about *us*. That summer. In Martinique?"

Her smile twisted slightly, indicating that she *did* remember that summer and remembered it well. With a manicured red fingernail, she traced the outline of the male lead on the paperback cover. "Is it? Have you read it, then?"

"Bits of it." The admission earned him another glance over the top of the sunglasses. Fuming, Nick leaned his back against the bar and crossed his arms. "Enough to know for sure."

"Ah, but there were many there with us in Martinique. It was a *hot* summer for all."

"But they weren't *there*. With... you and me."

"LaCroix was there."

Her voice was quiet, but it still sent a chill through him. Nick licked his lips. "Yes. But not then."

He glanced over at her. She shrugged, ever-so-slightly, then returned to sipping her drink. Unless he pressed it, that was the only answer he was going to get.

Leaning closer to her, Nick picked up the book, standing it on edge on the top of the bar. "You and me, Janette. I didn't write this."

"I should hope not. The author is —" she lifted the sunglasses and pretended to peer at the large, ornate type, "someone named 'Esmeralda Hope.'"

"And that someone is *you*."

Once again, she evaded the accusation, sipping from her glass, her shoulders twitching slightly in a shrug.

"You're not going to deny it?" he asked, surprised.

"It's tripe, but it sells." Janette took off the sunglasses and tossed them onto the bar. "And as you often remind me, Nicola, I do have a lot of mouths to feed."

She slipped off the barstool and started across the floor, abandoning her cigarette. Grabbing the book, Nick followed, dazzled by her sheer inability to comprehend the severity of the situation. "Then, you're responsible for *this*?"

"Nicola, you've always said that I should assume some responsibility for my actions." Janette tossed the comment to him over her shoulder and continued to a booth at the far end of the club. She paused once, beside a very young and very nubile young vampiress, who was falling out of her too-tight tank top. Without asking permission, she pulled the woman's top higher, whispering, "Flaunt it, but don't give it away. You're not that cheap. Make them pay."

Nick gave the startled vampiress a helpless smile as he followed in Janette's wake. Unlike his passage through the club, hers was unimpeded. The dancers scrambled to get out of her way. He finally caught up with her as she slipped into a booth, the glass of blood mixed with wine held before her, like a scrying glass.

"Don't you realize how dangerous this is?"

Janette took the book from his hands and tossed it onto the table. "Dangerous? Why? Nothing's ever mentioned about *us*." The emphasis was qualified by waving at their surroundings, to include the world of vampires which they inhabited. "Give me credit for some common sense. I wouldn't want *them* after me."

Nick seated himself in the booth beside her. "Not *us*. But... us."

For the first time, Janette's eyes met his evenly and her smile was warm, almost tender. Her hand reached out to touch his lips. "It's not *us* Nicola. Just certain circumstances. It's artistic license. Certain parts are exaggerated. Enhanced." Still smiling, her hand fell to her glass and she centered her attention on it, toying with the stem. "Don't pout, Nicola. It doesn't become you."

"I want it withdrawn."

Janette turned very wide eyes toward him. "Why? You come off very well." She picked up the book and began to flip through it. "Read chapter twenty-five --"

Nick pushed away the book. "It was written without my consent."

"Would you have given it?"

"No."

Janette dropped the book to the table top. "You see!" Relenting, she picked up the book again and ran her fingernails lightly across the cover, pouting. "Besides, they're not *all* about you."

That one word was like a bucket of freezing water. "*All*? There're more?"

The strangled gasp he emitted seemed to amuse her. "Of course." Flipping open the book, she showed him the inside flyleaf.

"Londerry Lust?" he read, turning horrified eyes to her after each title. "Singapore Seduction? Embrace In Istanbul? Moscow Moonlight -- wait a minute... we were never in Istanbul."

Janette cleared her throat loudly, then looked away. "I told you, they're not *all* about you." He thought he heard her mention something about the vanity of men beneath her breath, then she took the book from his grasp. "There was even one about LaCroix. A very dark book." She shook her head, then brightened. "And my best seller to date. They couldn't keep them in the stores. No accounting for mortal taste. As for this -- ah, it's a reprint. Which means I should be receiving a nice residual check very soon."

"A... reprint?" asked Nick, fighting to keep the note of horror from his voice.

"Of course. Each time they publish a new book, they usually reprint my best sellers --"

This time he didn't bother to mask the outright fear. "A *new* one?"

"Yes." Janette turned innocent eyes toward him -- well, at least it was an *attempt* at innocence. "They reprint the old books when the new book comes out. And when the Americans film the last one --"

"*Film?*"

The word was strangled beyond all sound, but she knew what he was trying to say. "Television, actually." Janette frowned in distaste, then sipped at her wine. "I think they call it a 'miniseries.' Jaclyn something-or-other is starring in it. As if they could ever capture *me* on film..."

Thankfully, her wounded pose lasted only a few seconds, before she placed her hand on his cheek. "Nicola, don't look so frightened! It was only a joke." As he sagged in relief, she added, "I haven't decided whether to accept their offer, yet. My agent says we should hold out for more money."

His heart sank at the news. "I hope you have a good agent."

"Oh, she's a real bloodsucker. She's been in the business since it started." Taking another sip of her wine, she met his eyes again, then laughed lightly. "Let the mortals have their fun! We've lived so long -- what could it hurt to share a little of our remembered passion if it will brighten their dull, drab existences?" Still holding the book, she eyed it speculatively. "And this belongs to your Natalie, eh?"

He took the book from her fingers quickly and glared down at the cover. Perhaps she was right. It wouldn't really hurt to have some of their adventures written for the ages -- so long as the characters appeared to be mortals. Not very ordinary mortals, surely, but from what he knew of those books, that wouldn't be a problem.

"Will you forgive me?" asked Janette, in her favorite little girl voice.

Still staring down at the book cover, he fought the smile that came to his lips and pretended to be stern. "Maybe," he answered gruffly.

Her fingers danced along the collar of his jacket, tracing the line of his ear, ruffling his hair. He could smell her perfume as she drew closer. "Nicola, is there *anything* I can do to make it up to you?"

"Yes," he whispered. Then, as her lips drew near, he held up the book between them. The smack of her lips against the paperback cover was audible. Lowering the book, he smiled at her glare and wiped the lipstick from the back cover with a napkin from the table. "Why don't you autograph this for Natalie?"

If possible, her glare deepened. Her eyes raked over the back cover and she sighed. "I really should have them change the description of the author. It sounds like I'm a decrepit spinster living alone on some forsaken seaside cliff. Maybe I'll have them add something about some young male servants. I'd need a gardener, at least, and three footmen --"

"People don't have footmen any longer," reminded Nick. "Not common people. But -- you're not common," he added quickly. Catching her fingers, he raised her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss on her knuckles, which won him a satisfied smile. Then he pushed the book into her hands. "An autograph."

"Very well." Janette opened the book to the title page and looked away. "What should it be? 'To Natalie, who has yet to know what I have known for so much longer?'"

"Janette," he warned.

She frowned, as if she didn't hear him. "No, that might be misconstrued. Nicola, what is appropriate in such matters? Perhaps I should send it to her?"

He shivered, thinking of the inscription Janette might come up with on her own. "No, I'll take it with me. I'll tell her I ran into Esmeralda in a bookstore or something. To Natalie, with regards from -- etcetera," he supplied, following her as she rose from the booth. "Where're you going?"

"There's a pen in my office."

"Um... do you have more of those?"

"Pens?"

"Books."

Janette stopped and turned to face him. "They send me a few copies out of courtesy. I suppose I have extras in my office." A slow smile crept across her face and she took a few steps toward him, backing him up against the booth. "Why, Nicola, are you interested in expanding your literary horizons? Or do you *not* remember Martinique as well as you claim?" She continued toward him, forcing him back against the wall, leaving less than an inch between them. "There are more interesting ways to remind you than reading a dusty old book, hmn?"

"Actually," Nick cleared his throat, feinted left, then moved right to escape the trap, "it's a present for someone. I thought I'd seen that book before I saw it on Natalie's desk. I've just remembered where."

She paused for an instant, her head tilted to one side in query, like a bird. "Would you like it personalized?"

"How about -- 'To my darling Don, thanks for the inspiration'?"

Janette stared at him, then shuddered. "That's too horrifying to think about." But she smiled, adding, "And too cruel to let pass. Ah, Nicola, you are too good a friend to these mortals."

Walking back to the booth, he wondered just what terms his friend and partner might find to describe him when he presented Schanke with the signed copy in the squad room, during the shift change. He had a feeling that 'good' would not be one of the words his friend would chose.

--The End--

What if LaCroix joined the Salvation Army?

(overheard on the Internet FORKNI-L List)

by Laurie M. Salopek

Major Barbara: So glad you saw the light, my dear. What made you take up the cause, Private LaCroix?

LaCroix: I always did like a uniform.

Major Barbara: Whatever turns your crank. I hope your ready for your first assignment, Private LaCroix. By the way, what's your first name??

LaCroix: Frank. But tell me, MB, what *is* this assignment ? I *do* hope it has something to do with "conversions"...

Major Barbara: This is something that only the best recruits get to do, and I'm so pleased to announce that you, Private LaCroix, are going to be this year's Santa Claus. What do you have to say to that?

LaCroix: Ho. Ho. Ho. So when do we hit the streets?

Major Barbara: I'm surprised to find you so anxious? What motivates you so?

LaCroix: My most dear wish is to help other give of themselves... actually, I'm very good at it. No one ever seems to say no...

Major Barbara: That's the kind of enthusiasm we need around here, with the infusion of new blood...

LaCroix: Did you say "blood?"

Knight's Dragon: A Round-Robin Story

by the members of FKFIC-L

Last issue, as some of you may remember, we published something a little . . . odd for a fanzine: a round robin story (you know, one writer starts it off, passing it off to the next one, and so on until somebody decides to end it). But, unlike many other round robin stories I've read, ours actually had a plot . . . and character development . . . and, uh, two endings. And nobody destroyed any friendships—in fact, several "virtual" ones developed!

We had so much fun, in fact, that somebody decided we should try it again. Here, while somewhat shorter than the last one, is proof that lightning can indeed strike twice . . .

Urged on by Margaret, Jennise started it off.

Part 1

by Jennise E. Hall <jennise@opus.dgi.com>

INT. RAVEN NIGHT

The club is crowded. JANETTE is perched on a stool at end of the bar watching the odd mixture of college students, fringe kids, and vampires as they dance, drink and otherwise enjoy life.

As if out of thin air, LACROIX appears behind Janette. He whispers into Janette's ear.

LACROIX

Miss me?

Janette's eyes open wide with fear. A second later she sets a noncommittal expression on her face, smiles, then turns to face him.

JANETTE

LaCroix, this is a surprise.

LACROIX

I can imagine.

Part 2

by Barbara Reid<barbara_reid@blyth.com>

LaCroix looked around the crowded club. He noted the expensive post-modern furnishings, the freshly decorated walls, the steel-and-Formica-topped tables, and finally the complex florescent light sculptures on the walls.

"Well," he said, "it looks like you're doing very well for yourself here."

"Thank you." Janette smiled slightly. She moved back one step. Slowly, unnoticeably. She automatically added, "Alma helped me with the decorating."

He turned briefly towards her, then moved his gaze to study the faces in the crowd before them. "Alma?" he said in a calm, pleasant tone. "Is this someone I should know?"

She paused, then said, "Probably not."

Distracted, he stepped away from her a bit. He fingered the wall of chains hanging from the club ceiling, gently pulling on the individual strands so they slowly released and fell clanking on each other. Their sound was inaudible above the live music.

He raised an eyebrow, a sincere, serious look on his face. "Nice touch!"

Then he was beside her again, his face parting in the old, familiar smile. He spoke softly.

"Perhaps we should go talk in your office."

Part 3

by Salieri <AUVERS@DRYCAS.CLUB.CC.CMU.EDU>

Janette, up until then, had managed to conceal her shock and horror on finding out that LaCroix was not destroyed as Nick said he had been. In fact, she noted, stealing a glance at him, he looked quite well for someone who had allegedly been staked and burned. He moved normally. There was not a mark on him as far as she could see. His face was as pale and perfect as it had ever been, full lips on the verge of his trademark sneer as he awaited her reply.

"Well?" he prompted.

While she had amazed herself with her relative calm under the circumstances, and being in her club—her home turf, so to speak—helped her maintain the confidence that usually fled in his presence, she was not about to be overconfident to the point of stupidity. Alone with LaCroix? Not if she could help it.

"Anything you have to say to me can be said right here, LaCroix."

His eyes widened in mock alarm. "Oh my. The little vixen has discovered her teeth, has she?" He placed his hands on her shoulders, and turned her to face him. "I thought I had taken care of that defiant streak long ago. Long, long ago," he added, his voice silken with menace. "We will speak in your office," he said, bringing his force of will to bear on her.

The iron grip of his hands on her shoulders was light as a lover's touch compared to the hold his mind had on hers. Her resistance faded. "In my office," she echoed dully, and turned to lead the way.

LaCroix released her, smiling, then added, "And we shouldn't be disturbed . . ."

"Alma," Janette called over her shoulder, "see that we're not disturbed."

"That's my girl," he chuckled softly, and followed her to the rear of the club.

Part 4

by Don Bassingthwaite <dbassing@EPAS.UTORONTO.CA>

[flashback– Renaissance England]

The coach pulled up in front of the roadside inn amidst a flurry of curses from the driver. It was a wonder, in fact, that the horses, already nervous, did not simply wither away on the spot, so vile were the man's oaths. The horses were no more nervous than the driver, though, and it all had to do with the three passengers that rode in the coach.

It was dangerous to travel at night, even along the Queen's highways and even on miserable nights like this. At least, he thought to himself, the rain had stopped and at least he would be well-paid. The man with hair the color of heavy gold had promised him a good wage for his services on their journey north. As well he should have– what kind of people traveled only by night? Daft nobles!

He swung down from his perch on top of the coach and opened the doors to allow his passengers to descend while he busied himself getting down their baggage. The mud sucked at his feet as he moved.

"Only the small chests and the large blue box, Luke! We'll be leaving again in the evening– no need to bring in the others. They'll be safe enough."

That was Sir Nicholas, the man with sun-gold hair. Luke had seen Sir Walter Raleigh not long ago, just after his return to England. At the time he had thought Sir Walter to be the grandest sight he had ever seen. Sir Nicholas made Walter Raleigh look like a bumpkin.

"Speak for your own things, Nicholah!" The Lady Janette. If Luke could compare Sir Nicholas to Sir Walter, there was no one he could compare Lady Janette to. He had simply never seen a woman as beautiful. "I will require all of my chests."

"Yes, ma'am." Luke felt like a mere stablehand again instead of the veteran of the roads that he was.

"Leave your chests. I want to get a room well before the sun comes up. I don't know why you insisted on bringing so many clothes on this trip . . . or why you wanted to take a coach." Luke's final passenger poked his head out of the coach door and the driver buried his eyes in his work. The man with the pale hair and the cold face frightened him.

"Because I wanted to see the country as . . ." Janette hesitated for a moment, ". . . as common people see it. I want to see the Wall and everything on the way to it!"

"The Wall is a boring line of rocks separating one stretch of cold, rocky land from another stretch of cold, rocky land. There isn't anything to see—there certainly wasn't thirteen hundred years ago."

"I want . . ."

"Enough!" Luke heard the sound of boots on the steps of inn and then pounding on the door. "Rooms!" called the pale-haired man. "Travelers seek rooms!"

Luke risked a glance up. Janette was looking at him. She smiled. He smiled back. "What's the name of this inn, Luke?"

He pointed up at the moon-lit sign above the door and the large black bird that was painted on it. "The Raven, lady, and the finest . . ." Abruptly, he realized that both Sir Nicholas and the pale-haired man were turned and looking at him. He dropped his eyes back to his work.

Janette turned herself to stare indignantly at LaCroix.

Part 5

by Lisa McDavid <D020214@univscvm.bitnet>

Janette took a cigarette from the pack on her desk, inserted it into her holder, and reached for the Fabergé lighter in the shape of a dragon. LaCroix's hand flashed out, to catch her wrist and twist her hand away. She cried out with pain.

LaCroix smiled indulgently. "Not only claws, it seems. Naughty, naughty, my dear. I'd advise against trying to set fire to me, unless you want to go up, too."

"I wasn't!" Janette lied.

"Really? *Ma pauvre* Janette, it would appear that Nicholas's dullwittedness is catching. Now, then, shall we start over?" LaCroix seated himself on the edge of the desk. "I know very well that Nicholas is still playing at his latest fancy, including that dreary loft."

Curiosity temporarily got the better of fear. Janette frowned. "Then why have you come to me? He doesn't—" She shut off the sentence, but the damage was done.

"Exactly as I thought, then." LaCroix nodded. "He doesn't come to you to confide these days. Oh, yes, I've seen him with Dr. Lambert. Tell me, my dear, why haven't you used that?"

"I've tried," said Janette. There was bitter acid in her voice. "Hypnotism doesn't work on Natalie."

LaCroix's eyebrows rose. "Really? An interesting challenge. And it's 'Natalie,' is it?" He walked over to her, and stared into her eyes. "Let's see about that." Janette shuddered, but could not resist. Pictures formed in her mind and transferred to her master's. Nicholas's loft, invaded by Natalie Lambert at a very inopportune moment, just after Nick had nearly gotten himself the Chinese equivalent of staked. The Raven, just at the entrance to the back rooms, as the doctor insisted on going in to Nick, against Janette's best efforts to stop her.

LaCroix released her. Janette clasped shaking hands in her lap as she collapsed into her desk chair. "How convenient of you," he said, and picked up the telephone directory. "You've called the good doctor before."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing arcane, I assure you. Circled numbers usually have been used." He lifted the phone from its cradle. "I think I'd better dial. We wouldn't want any accidents."

"But what am I supposed to say?" Janette asked. It wasn't necessary to fake bewilderment. Hers was quite genuine.

LaCroix pressed the first number. "Anything you like-- as long as you don't mention me, and do tell Dr. Lambert that poor, dear Nicholas is unconscious in your flat. Oh, don't look so horrified. I'm not asking you to lie! It's perfectly true."

Part 6

by Barbara Reid <barbara_reid@blyth.com>

The door to the office opened with a bang. In stumbled Alma, her hair disheveled, her arms stacked with boxes, an order form tightly clenched in her teeth. Perilously, she balanced the heavy boxes on the corner of the desk. "Whew!" she said, blowing her red bangs out of her eyes. The boxes and the hair no longer blocking her sight, she saw the frozen tableau before her.

"New around here, aren't you?" She spoke lightly to LaCroix. She seemed to have no concept of the tension straining like electric charges through the dark room.

Aghast disbelief registered briefly on the master vampire's features. His hand on the Princess line touch-tone phone didn't move. He spoke to Janette without turning toward her. "She's one of us, isn't she." It was a statement.

But Alma was busily reading the form in her hand, still too oblivious to read or sense the emotions of those before her.

"Hadn't she heard me?" Janette thought quickly. Alma had been at the bar, turned away from them when LaCroix showed up. Talking, no, arguing with a man in a blue delivery suit. She hadn't noticed them go into the office!

"Hey, handsome!" Alma suddenly spoke. She smirked at LaCroix. "Wanna dance?"

He started to snarl. Alma stepped back a moment, surprised. She let go of the boxes. A bright green light came into her eyes, and from her throat came a deep, rumbling yowl.

Then the boxes, their fragile support vanished, slid and fell in a crash of shattered glass and mangled cardboard on the polished oak office floor.

LaCroix and Alma stared at each other, astonished, the green lights quickly extinguished.

"Hey," quipped Alma cheerfully, "you're fun!"

She turned to check with Janette, to see whether this was a special friend of hers, or whether it was okay to pursue him herself. And stopped. The space next to her was empty. Alma looked quickly around the room. The nightclub owner was gone.

So was the Fabergé lighter. LaCroix slammed a fist onto the desk.

[flashback-- Renaissance England]

The large blue box was on the floor at the base of the stairway. The room was smoky enough, with peat burning in the fireplace and food stewing in iron caldrons over it.

"You'll be wanting dinner first. Or you gentlemen and lady wanna a bath?" The hotel owner waited their reply.

The cold-faced taller of the two men spoke. "Neither will be fine. Just our rooms."

"We have nice warm rooms on the second floor, next to the chimneys, and with a good southern light." The hotel owner was relieved. They'd already supped, and were too exhausted for anything but bed.

"A northern window will do fine for us. We are tired, without sleep for three days now. Do not wake us, for lunch or dinner." The tall man pulled gold out of his pocket. "This amount again tomorrow evening. We are expecting no one, so there will be no reason to tell anyone we are here."

Janette stood looking at the room. The long benches, the large fireplaces. The small box was still in her arms. She had not given it up when the coachman offered to carry it for her. It was not too heavy, and was about the size of a glove box. A beautiful pagoda was etched on its cover.

"LaCroix, isn't this a lovely place? Don't you think it's a good size? And the rows of bottles. Over there. It is amusing, yes?"

He walked deliberately loudly up the stairs. Without turning back he only said, "Give it up, Janette."

Part 7

by Jennise E. Hall <jennise@opus.dgi.com>

INT. RAVEN -- JANETTE'S OFFICE -- NIGHT

LaCroix slams his fist on the desk. He turns back to Alma, who gives him her sexiest pose.

LACROIX

Interrupt me again and you will feel the full measure of my brand of fun.

He storms past her and out of the room.

ALMA

Hmmmmm. Kinky.

She begins cleaning up the mess.

INT. ELEVATOR --NIGHT

JANETTE waits impatiently for the door to slide open onto Nick's loft.

INT. NICK'S LOFT --NIGHT

An obviously shaken NATALIE stands in the midst of chaos trying to right the awkward dining table. Janette makes no move to help.

JANETTE

He was telling the truth.

The voice startles Natalie. She almost drops the table.

NATALIE

Janette!

JANETTE

Seldom does the truth serve his purposes.

NATALIE

Who? Where's Nick?

JANETTE

LaCroix.

NATALIE

But he's...

JANETTE

Apparently more resilient than we realized. He told me Nick was unconscious in my flat.

NATALIE

So naturally you decided to check here first.

JANETTE

This was the more prudent choice.

NATALIE

Prudent?

Janette spins on her heel and heads for the elevator. Natalie hesitates a moment then races after her.

JANETTE

He knows about this place . . . and you.

INT. ELEVATOR -- NIGHT

JANETTE

The truly annoying thing is he's got my club. I intend to get it back.

(under her breath)

Claws indeed.

NATALIE

Where are we going?

JANETTE

Why don't you decide.

NATALIE

How about we go get Nick!

JANETTE

Don't be a fool, Natalie. LaCroix is powerful and my former master.

Natalie notices the Fabergé lighter that Janette clutches in her hand.

JANETTE

This situation calls for a bit of distance and planning.

The elevator doors open.

JANETTE

We'll take my car.

Part 8

by Lisa McDavid <D020214@univscvm.bitnet>

"Here! Hold this so it doesn't get broken." Janette slammed into reverse, swung the wheel hard over and roared out of Gateway Lane like a demented sky rocket. Natalie thanked heaven for the automatic seat belt and shoulder harness. Nick had once told her that Janette's driving frightened him, and he had learned his flying, while a temporary prisoner of war in late 1916, from the Red Baron himself. Nick was a veteran pilot of the old-fashioned barnstorming type, and Janette's driving still gave him white knuckles.

Nick! Natalie forced down a sob. Instead she looked down at the object which Janette had thrust into her hands. "Er, Janette?"

"Yes?" They shot through a red light.

"Well, actually I was going to ask about the dragon, but . . . you do realize that traffic court only meets by day?"

Janette frowned, then laughed. "Oh, yes, you can't hypnotize your way out of tickets. What about the dragon?"

"What is it for?" Natalie braced both feet and one shoulder as Janette turned without bothering with signals. She hoped the 90 degree angle the car had just done was an illusion.

"It's a table lighter and we're going to use it to set fire to LaCroix." Her mouth tightened.

"Are we?" asked Natalie with the hypercalm of shock. "I thought Nick tried that, and we've just found out it didn't work."

"Nicolah didn't follow through. I should have known– he never does. He's too easily distracted." Janette floored the gas and roared onto the freeway at a speed suitable for launching a space probe.

Natalie read the next exit sign by the shape of the letters instead of the actual words. "Janette, this is the wrong way for downtown."

"We aren't going downtown." The black sports car whipped in front of a semi with possibly ten centimeters to spare. Nat wondered if it mightn't be safer to abandon the restraints for a catatonic crouch on the floor. The driver of the semi made a gesture that was old when Janette was still mortal. The vampire snarled at him.

"My God!" This time Nat did scream, although the crash behind them covered the full effect. "Janette, you scared him into the noise berm!"

"Really? I was hoping for the bridge– much more likely to teach him a permanent lesson." She checked her mirror. "*Sacre bleu!* He's crawling out of it."

Natalie's sigh of relief was audible. "But if we're not going downtown, where are we going?"

"Away. Hush! I can't hear the CB." After a few seconds she nodded. "Good. He got our number. The police should be after us any minute now."

"Janette?" Natalie was actually quavering. She could deduce just one solution. LaCroix's resurrection must have driven Janette mad. "Why do you want the police after us?"

Janette tossed her head impatiently. "How does Nicolah stand all these questions?" No less than three blue lights began strobing in their wake, and a fourth flared on an overpass. Sirens screamed all around. "Oh, good! There's a road block. That will make things much easier. Here, don't you dare let go of that lighter– it's really Nick's and he's very attached to it, even if he has got that silly mortal idea about not smoking."

Natalie hugged the dragon to her as if it were Nick himself. Janette reached across her and flipped the emergency latches on the passenger seat harness open. She snapped, "Don't move!" in a tone capable of cowering the average tiger. Nat froze.

The driver's side belts followed. The locks flew open under remote control. Janette wedged the accelerator open by the simple expedient of kicking it so that it bent out of shape. All of these preparations flashed by so fast that Nat had no time to wonder what they were for.

"*Pardon, s'il vous plait.*" Janette tapped her on the shoulder. Nat opened eyes she couldn't remember closing, and promptly wished she hadn't. Janette's eyes were glowing like molten lava, and her fangs had taken over her face. "It's only going to hurt a little!" She sank her teeth into the mortal woman's neck, just as the car impacted a police unit with a hideous, grinding crash.

* * *

In the dim cavern that was the after-hours Raven, Alma screamed and pointed, yammering, at the television, where dawn was breaking behind Tawny Teller, who was wrapping a live report. "The car was registered to a Ms. Janette Lenoir, the owner of the Raven nightclub. The purse which was thrown clear has been identified as belonging to Dr. Natalie Lambert, the coroner who has figured in several controversial cases recently. Police have been unable to locate either woman, and there has been no report of the car's being stolen. It is greatly feared that both Ms. Lenoir and Dr. Lambert were in the vehicle when it crashed. The officer in charge has issued a statement that no one who was inside could have survived the impact, let alone the flames after the explosion."

* * *

In the bushes on the other side of the freeway, Janette permitted herself a sardonic smile as she listened to the reporter fight for professional calm. It was a pity Natalie was still unconscious; otherwise she could have asked whether that was the one who had nearly gotten Nick killed by the Enforcers. Oh, well. A conscious Nat would probably have struggled at being pulled out of the car and flown away at the height necessary to avoid detection.

The smile broadened. Tony never closed the bar without checking the late news. She wondered how LaCroix would react to the news that his two chief pawns were out of play.

Part 8A

by Lisa McDavid <D020214@univscvm.bitnet>

. . .The nightclub owner was gone.

So was the Fabergé lighter. LaCroix slammed a fist onto the desk.

LaCroix strode out of the office so quickly that Alma was knocked sprawling. "Hey," she protested, "that's not nice!"

"It wasn't meant to be," LaCroix flung over his shoulder. "Things will be even less nice if you don't keep out of them." He stormed up the stairs to Janette's flat and kicked the door open.

The bound figure on Janette's bed was awake, in spite of a mummy-like encasing of silver chains engraved all over with vaguely pre-Colombian glyphs. From the crumpled state of the black silk spread it was clear that Nick had not meekly accepted captivity. He had wriggled most of the way off the blanket which had originally been under him.

LaCroix shook his head. "Nicholas, Nicholas! I told you there was no escape. One would think a Crusader would have some capacity for faith." Nick glared at him, unable to retort because of the gag which masked the lower half of his face. "Be still, now," his captor added, gathering him up in the

spread so as to avoid contact with the chains. "Silk's slippery as it is. If you were to slide loose you'd be very likely to fall very hard from a great height. And that would be a pity with this pointed where it is." A small but serviceable wooden stake which had been lying on the bedside table was fitted into a socket in one loop, directly over Nick's heart.

Carrying Nick over his shoulder, LaCroix swung both legs over the window sill and flew them both away.

A few minutes later they landed on the roof of 101 Gateway Lane. Having unceremoniously deposited Nick on the concrete, the other vampire lifted the metal roof of the elevator shaft, together with the top of the elevator.

LaCroix was smiling as he hauled Nick down into the car.

"Don't look so chagrined, dear boy. You can't think of everything, particularly if you're going to live in quarters designed for a mortal. I didn't think there'd be an alarm for the elevator shaft, much less one for the doors." He pressed the button, and the elevator opened into the loft.

"I thought so! Janette will affect Chanel Number 5, and that mortal of yours can't seem to rid herself entirely of all those unaesthetic chemicals. The safest hiding place really is under the sheriff's bed. They've come and gone. They won't think of looking here again."

Nick was deposited on the couch. LaCroix settled himself into one of the chairs, and took up the remote for the wide screen television. "Shall we see what's on? I'm sure you wouldn't want a guest to be bored in your house."

Part 9

by Karin Welss <kwelss@us.oracle.com>

. . .The smile broadened. Tony never closed the bar without checking the late news. Janette wondered how LaCroix would react to the news that his two chief pawns were out of play.

* * *

Tawny Teller's voice, given magnificent resonance by a set of tall stereo speakers hooked up the large screen TV, was abruptly cut off in mid-sentence. A pale hand, adorned only by a baroque pearl ring on the little finger, lowered the remote control, and tossed it carelessly aside.

The sudden silence in Nick's loft was broken by the sound of an ironic chuckle. "Ah Janette, *ma belle,* you're too clever by half."

The tall, pale-haired man looked at the loft's other inhabitant, who glared resentfully back at him. "But, Nicholas, I think she at least would have learned by now . . ."

* * *

Flashback: Renaissance England

A slight rustle on the darkened staircase behind him alerted Nicholas. He glanced up from the book he was reading, in time to see Janette furtively trying to slip through the parlor and out the front door.

"Janette, where are you going? It's almost dawn," said Nicholas in a low voice, frowning at his dark-haired companion. She was bundled up in her hooded traveling cloak.

"Shhh!" hissed Janette, glancing nervously up the stairs. "He'll hear us!"

No need to ask who he *was. LaCroix had retired to his room with a buxom chambermaid somewhat earlier. He had herded the giggling girl upstairs, smirking, mouthing the word* supper *at Nicholas over her head. Nicholas wondered absently if the girl would survive her tryst. Sometimes they did. Often they did not. And sometimes, they went mad.*

"I wouldn't worry about that, if I were you," Nicholas' mouth twisted. "He's . . . occupied."

"Yes, of course," Janette replied, casting another worried glance up the stairs nevertheless. "But I-- need your help."

"To do what?" he inquired, puzzled.

"To escape him. I cannot bear it anymore!" she whispered, fiercely, pulling the hood even tighter over her dark, glossy tresses. "I am leaving him, Nicholah. Luke the coachman has agreed to take me away from here. From him. But there's a price."

There was a brief instant of pain in his dark blue eyes, then Nicholas lifted his eyebrows ironically, a gesture he had learned from LaCroix. "There's always a price. Aren't you willing to pay it, Janette?" His eyes raked contemptuously down the front of her tightly fastened traveling cloak. "I can't imagine that you, of all women, would be suddenly squeamish at the idea of . . . trading your favors."

Janette's head snapped around, as if he had slapped her. "That was unkind of you, after all that we have endured together," she said, her eyes immense sapphire pools in a colorless white face. "I need your help, Nicholah. I was hoping that you, of all men, would take pity on me. You know what he can be like . . ."

Nicholas' face softened, and he said, still in a tone so quiet that mortal ears would have strained to hear him at all: "Why not simply coerce the coachman? And make him believe that you have paid his price?"

Janette clutched the cloak's hem with fingers whitened by the strain. "I . . . cannot. Don't you think I've tried? Oh Nicholah, please help me. You know that I have nothing to bribe that man with-- not even an allowance. LaCroix thinks he can control us by controlling the purse strings--"

"And he does," Nicholas interjected, bitterly. "Have you no jewelry, Janette? No pretty baubles to tempt a poor coachman with?"

"You know I do not," she replied, with equal bitterness. "He lets me have nothing, not after the . . . last time."

She and Nicholas traded a glance filled with shared pain. "And I have only—" his face tightened. "Ah Janette, mon coeur, *do not ask it of me. Please."*

"Nicholah," she said, in a voice so soft it was barely a puff of breath from between her red, red lips. "I beg you . . . in the name of all we have shared in four hundred years, please help me. I know your dragon is precious to you— but it is only a hunk of cold carved stone—"

Instantly she knew she had made a mistake. Nicholas reached out and stroked her cheek. "No colder than your heart, my lady," he said, with sarcastic courtesy. "I love you— I need *you— and you are leaving me? Leaving us? After all that we've been through, after all that we have endured?"*

A fine speech, *thought Janette. He sounded just like LaCroix. But then, he had always been an apt pupil in all that his master had to teach him.*

"Ah, yes, always the brave knight and gentleman," Janette said, with a contempt that sprang from deep hurt. "Well, keep your precious statue, then. I will find some other way of paying Luke what I owe him. But I will remember you— and this. Farewell, Nicholas." She opened the parlor door quietly and left him standing there, the book still in his hand, knowing full well that the priceless carved jade dragon she had begged of him was already neatly sewn into a pocket of her traveling dress. The glove box with its embossed pagoda sat empty and abandoned upstairs. Janette never admitted to having a conscience, but stealing from Nicholas bothered her.

"I had no other choice," she told herself firmly, as she stepped into the pale gray dawn. The sun would be up shortly, and she would be safe from pursuit— at least until dusk. Luke beamed at her as he helped her into the coach with its tightly covered windows. Why, here he was, helpin' a fine lady escape from her cruel husband, just like in the old stories. And with a fine treasure as his reward, to boot.

* * *

The next evening, shortly before they were to resume their journey, LaCroix came sauntering down the stairs, to where Nicholas was sitting in the parlor, staring into the fire. I should have helped her, *he was thinking, guiltily.* I should have given it to her.

"Good evening, Nicholas," said the familiar, silken voice. Nicholas looked up to see his master standing close to the fire, stretching out his hands in a pretense of warming them. "Brooding again, are we? I see you've heard about the accident."

"Accident?" Nicholas asked, startled. What game was LaCroix playing now? Did he know that Janette and Luke were gone?

"Yes, our coach was found wrecked next to the highway. Shattered to pieces. A pity, that— now we're stranded in this miserable little inn until a replacement can be found," Fire reddened the cropped pale hair as LaCroix turned to face Nicholas. "And a pity about the coachman as well— I had fostered hopes that the lout was trainable . . . I wonder what he was doing gallivanting around the countryside like that? And speaking of the coachman, have you seen Janette this evening?"

Nicholas looked up, trying to hide his reaction to the news. "No, I haven't," he replied, with complete honesty, feeling dread knot his stomach. The coach wrecked— in the sunlight. Perhaps she escaped. Perhaps she was free . . .

Part 9A

by Susan M. Garrett <susang2522@aol.com>

The squad room was quiet. Too quiet.

Schanke's eyes began to glaze over as he stared at the paperwork on his desk. All these boxes and squares and lines to fill in. Life would be a heck of a lot easier if he were a private eye. The P.I.'s got all the good cases-- lots of excitement, beautiful women, and when they found a corpse with a bullet between the eyes, there was always a sax wailing in the background. Then again, P.I.'s tended to get beaten up a lot . . .

"Schanke?"

He sat upright in his chair and fumbled with the pen that nearly slipped from his hand. Just as happy to interrupt the flow of that particular daydream, he offered the Captain a relieved smile. "Yeah, Captain?"

"What've you got going?"

"Paperwork on the Carlton case." Schanke flicked his wrist toward the file, then started up from his chair. "But if you've got something else--?"

"Thought you were supposed to finish that last night?"

"Uh, there was the body in the bus terminal last night--"

"Yeah." Stonetree nodded, one of his 'good excuse' nods. "Good. You finish the paper on that." Then he glanced over at Nick's empty desk. "Where's Knight?"

Schanke shrugged. "I know he hasn't signed in yet, but he's probably out, following up that bus terminal thing. You know how he works."

"Yeah. I know." Stonetree was a man of few words, but he didn't need many when he could put so much disapproval into 'I know.' "Your partner comes in, I want him in my office."

"Sure thing, Captain." He waited until Stonetree was back in his own office before slumping down in his chair. Well, now he was stuck finishing up the Carlton paperwork. That could take all night.

Then his gaze fell on the phone. For a moment, he considered dialing and leaving Nick a message . . . no, that could wait a while. And if Nick didn't answer, maybe he'd drop by his night owl partner's place. But why waste the effort? Knowing Nick, he'd walk into the station in another hour with an I.D. on the body from the bus station under one arm and the perp tucked under another.

Schanke took a deep breath, then tried to concentrate on the paperwork in front of him. So many little boxes to fill in. P.I.'s didn't have all this paperwork. And the really lucky ones had partners they could count on. Yeah . . . it was the partners who got beaten up all the time. . .

* * *

(I just felt so bad for Schanke-- so far he's only a voice on the phone. Awwwwwww.)

Part 9B

by John Dencoff <jdencoff@POLARIS.UNM.EDU>

[flashback: Renaissance England]

Janette awoke with a start, her head throbbing. It was night, fortunately, but where was she? Slowly the memories came back to her: she had tried to escape LaCroix, and she'd betrayed Nicolah— sweet Nicolah— in order to do it.

Even fate was against her, tying her firmly to LaCroix. The coach had crashed. That idiot Luke was going too fast, and he'd been forced to swerve to avoid a fallen tree. Then . . . then she had known pain . . . pain like she had never felt before. Something like fire seared her nerves. Something holy.

Nicolah's jade dragon lay before her, still inside the broken coach. It too had broken, the head fallen away from the body. And there was a light coming from inside . . . brilliant, painful light.

Then she awoke here. "Luke! Are you here?" she cried. She was in some kind of barn, but one that held no animals. Her senses expanded, and she could hear someone approaching.

"Who are you?" he said, still hovering in the shadows. "Are you some kind of witch? They burn witches, you know." Janette stepped back, hoping to catch a glimpse of this man.

"Where am I? Have you seen my coachman?" she replied innocently, a bit of worry laced into her words. "We crashed, and I haven't seen him since."

It was Luke. He stepped from the shadows, blocking her exit. He held something in his hand, wrapped in heavy cloth. "And what is this?" he said, holding it out to her. He had replaced the dragon's head, but light still shone from the cracks through the cloth.

The pain, again. It was almost too much to bear. She backstepped again. "Please. What do you want of me?" Was this Nicolah's statuette? What could it possibly be, to cause such pain?

As Luke stepped forward, an evil gleam in his eyes, he unfolded the cloth. "You are a witch! And this . . . a holy artifact of the Church!!" He pulled the dragon out, and a small finger bone fell into his hand. It burned him a bit, and he let it fall back into the core of the dragon. Still, it was out, and the jade didn't fully surround it. Jeanette trembled, and fell. Nearly paralyzed, she was at the mercy of this madman.

But a voice came out of the darkness, far behind Luke. "Indeed, an artifact of the church. But it is not for you, and you will not take this woman's life." Janette saw— it was Nicolah!

"Close it now, before you come to regret your actions!" he said, stepping toward Luke. It burned him as well, the light, but Luke could barely see him.

"She is a witch!" he protested!

"No! She is no witch! And you will not take her life!"

Luke began to tremble, confused. Power in his hands, but this man was right. He couldn't kill her. He closed the dragon, and handed it to Nicholas in the darkness.

Janette made a move toward Luke, but Nicholas intervened. "But why?" she said under her breath. "He nearly killed us, sweet Nicolah!"

"I've seen enough of death, Janette. I was lucky to have found you. Think of that instead of murder. We can't escape him, you know. We should be getting back." Luke stood in the door, lost in his own thoughts.

"What is it? The dragon, Nicolah?" her own thoughts turning to a darker revenge against LaCroix.

In a new coach, they made their way back to the town, its wheels going considerably slower in the darkness. "It's an artifact, Janette. But I know what you're thinking . . . it would paralyze us as well. We can't use it against him. Maybe that's why he gave it to me. A cheerless irony, don't you think?"

But Janette had other things on her mind.

"I'll have to see if it can be repaired, somehow," he said absently.

* * *

When they returned to the Inn, LaCroix met them in Janette's room. His eyes were cold, but unemotional. "Leave us," he said simply to Nicholas. He complied, casting a worried look to Janette.

"My dear, I've told you that you will never leave me. It's a dangerous fantasy you have. You still don't know many things which are essential to your survival."

"I'll be free of you someday, LaCroix." But she couldn't truly believe it. "I will."

He laughed . . . a joyless laugh that left the room terribly quiet. "Perhaps, but not today. Now, let's see. I must go and discipline our driver. He must never let you do such a precarious thing again."

Later, she heard the screams. Luke wasn't being 'disciplined,' he was being killed. Slowly, and painfully. It was meant to frighten her, and LaCroix was doing exactly that.

Part 10

by Margaret Newman <margaret@CS.ARIZONA.EDU>

[flashack: Renaissance England]

Free? Janette would never be free of LaCroix. There had been that momentary hope that she could break loose of him, but that hope was crushed now. Crushed as brutally as Luke and his carriage. She patted her hair to make sure it was neat and in place. A delicate, long fingered hand brushed the front of her dress to remove any imaginary specks of lint. Her jaw was set, and her eyes were dark with emotion. If Nicholas had helped . . .

"Janette?" The door to her room opened, and Nicholas paused in the threshold. "LaCroix said--" He did not know what to say. She was as beautiful as ever, no marks on her face to show if LaCroix had beaten her. "I am sorry, Janette." He sighed, staring across the room at her, his eyes full of pain.

"So am I, Nicolah," she replied, her lips pressed in a thin line. Bitterness hung about her like a wet wool cape on a hot summer's afternoon. "So am I."

* * *

Nick watched LaCroix as he stood, and crossed to a window. The shades open, LaCroix stared into the growing dawn for a while. Nick struggled silently against the chains that held him. The silver pressing through his clothes stung, leaving red welts. What had Janette done with Natalie? How had LaCroix returned from certain death?

The phone rang. LaCroix, a smile curving his lips, turned to listen to the machine. He pressed the remote, and the shades slowly began to seal the loft from sunlight.

"Hi, this is Nick Knight, I'm either in bed or incommunicado, so leave a message at the beep."

beep

"Hey, Nick ol' buddy, this is Schanke. Don Schanke, your partner. You know, the guy you work with." Don's voice was full of sarcasm. "Where in the hell are you? I can't find Nat, either. If you two are having a torrid affair there--" Don laughed, "I wanna be a fly on the wall when you explain to Stonetree why you didn't show up for work last night. Call, okay?"

click

"Hell, indeed," LaCroix chuckled. He set the remote down on the table before coming to stand beside Nick on the couch. "Chains a little too tight, Nicholas?"

Nick's eyes sparkled with suppressed fury. He glared helplessly up at his master. LaCroix's stance was relaxed, confident. Hands in pockets, muscles at ease, he looked quite friendly and charming. Except for the hard glitter in his eyes; the slight compression of his full, well-shaped lips.

"I am going to teach you the lesson of obeying me one last time, Nicholas. If you survive this lesson, you will never, ever disobey me again." LaCroix rested a hand on the back of the couch, leaning close to Nick. His right hand reached out, and long, lean fingers gently traced the lines of Nick's face. "I think you understand me quite well. There was a time when you and I were quite the close companions. I hope, for your sake, we become so again."

LaCroix laughed at the thoughts he heard in Nicholas' mind. Becoming friends again was not what Nick intended. LaCroix patted Nick's cheek gently.

"Ah, my dear boy. You are always so entertaining." LaCroix sighed as he opened the refrigerator. "I see you are well stocked, but with that disgusting bovine brand. It is a good thing I brought some of my own, isn't it?"

LaCroix withdrew a tall, white glass bottle that contained a dark red fluid. He removed the cork, though not with his teeth. He took a glass from the cabinet, and poured himself a drink. He sipped, and licked his lips in appreciation.

"How rude of me to drink in front of you." LaCroix appeared again at Nick's side. He set the empty glass on the coffee table, and using his free hand, worked the gag off of Nick's mouth. "Instead of making an offer, this time I shall insist on you drinking with me."

Nick opened his mouth to retort, and LaCroix was ready. He poured the fluid from the bottle into Nick's mouth. Nick quickly shut his mouth, spitting and shaking his head. LaCroix kept pouring, covering Nick's head with the blood. Human blood.

"Your manners leave quite a bit to be desired. Perhaps I should teach you a lesson in that as well." LaCroix drained the rest of the contents of the bottle himself. "1993, a very good year, don't you think?"

"For me, it will be." Nick replied very coldly. "For you, no." He was trying very hard to ignore the blood on his face, soaking his shirt, and the couch. Some had gotten past his lips and down his throat, though not much. Enough, however, to remind him of its potency.

"I do so love a challenge." LaCroix waved the bottle over Nick's face before tossing it against the wall above the fireplace. The shattering glass went every where.

* * *

Natalie sat up in the bushes. She could hear traffic zooming by not far away. Janette turned from contemplating the sky to stare down at her. Nat rubbed her neck where Janette had bitten her, and glowered.

"You didn't have to do that." Nat stood shakily.

"I felt it was necessary," Janette shrugged. "We have to get moving. It is almost dawn."

"Without your car, we can't get very far very fast." Nat glanced around their surroundings.

"There are other modes of transportation, my dear." Janette stepped towards Natalie. Nat took a few steps backwards, holding up her hands.

"No more biting." She warned. Janette grabbed a hand.

"Oh, don't be such a poor sport." The vampire growled.

Part 11

by Susan M. Garrett <susang2522@aol.com>

Natalie wouldn't have minded the flying. Of course, slung over Janette's shoulder, everything was rushing past her in the wrong direction. And then there were those sequins digging into her ribs . . .

But the sun was beginning to rise and Janette needed shelter. Natalie had no idea where they were going and getting there was definitely not her idea of fun. When they landed at one of the rear entrances to a store located in a large shopping mall, Natalie leaned against the wall aghast . . . and only part of the weakness in her knees was from the unexpected sensation of having the ground suddenly rush up at her, then being tossed onto the tar of the parking area without ceremony or warning.

"At least you fly better than you drive," she commented.

Janette was wrenching the padlock from the rear access door. "I've had more experience flying. Driving is such a new pastime."

"I'd love to see the age listed on your driver's license."

Janette turned to look at her, then hissed, as the rising sun escaped the few clouds low in the morning sky. She flung open the door and Natalie was wrenched into the dark, concrete hall by a vise-like grip.

There were electric lights inside the small alleyway. Natalie reached behind her, closing the door, and was more than a little relieved to find than she wasn't trapped in total darkness with Janette.

For her own part, Janette reached past her to snap the door handle into place. "We must keep out the undesirables," she announced. Then, grabbing Natalie's shoulder, she propelled her through the labyrinth.

"You sound like you own the place."

"I do." Janette smiled at her look of surprise, and her grip relaxed slightly. "Actually, I own the salon."

Natalie stared at her over her shoulder, then walked of her own accord in the direction Janette indicated. "Nick's never mentioned it."

"Nicholah doesn't know."

They had reached a doorway. Janette twisted the knob and Natalie heard the metal lock snap in two. She followed Janette into the back of what appeared to be a very fashionable clothing salon. "Must cost you a small fortune in locks."

"I usually have a key." Sighing, Janette sank into a chair, crossed her legs and folded her arms. "It's enough to keep out mortal thieves. If LaCroix wanted to enter, no lock would stop him. Thankfully, he doesn't know about this place, either."

Natalie was amazed by the mannequins, the boxes, the fabric, and the dresses . . . what dresses! "You're just full of surprises."

"You think I dress off the rack?" Janette assumed a wounded air. She lifted a pack of cigarettes from the desk beside her and tapped one out of the box. "Obviously, you do. Or is it . . . mail order?"

"Actually, I'd never really thought about when you'd shop." Natalie glanced overhead, at the solid ceiling. "The lower floor of two levels, set back from the entrance-- as long as you avoid parts of the second level and the skylights, you could spend the entire day here."

"Ummm." Janette picked up a small gold lighter from the desk and lit the cigarette. "I can do much from here. And you can bring me the things I need."

"May I remind you that my wallet is in what's left of your car," said Natalie.

"Money isn't a problem." Janette flicked the cigarette ash carefully into an ashtray, avoiding a piece of cloth draped over her desk. "Mobility is."

Natalie was suddenly pinned by Janette's gaze. "What?" she asked, smoothing down her torn clothing and her more than windblown hair.

"As far as the world's concerned, you're dead. You'll need a new look to hide you, while you run your errands." Her eyes still on Natalie, Janette walked to where several mannequins stood. "Yes, I think Eva could do something for your appearance. When the stores begin to open, I'll send someone for food. Fortunately, I supped just before LaCroix's arrival."

"And after," reminded Natalie, rubbing her neck.

In response, Janette flicked her cigarette ash and it obediently landed in the small brass ashtray once again. "You should know, Natalie, that you must do as I say. Our lives, and Nicholah's, depend on that."

Natalie folded her arms, still not quite prepared to completely trust Janette. "What does he want?"

"LaCroix?" Toying with the drapery on one of the mannequins, Janette shrugged. "What he's always wanted . . . control. He has Nicholah. He needs me to complete the set."

"And he doesn't consider you much of a threat."

The observation didn't seem to bother Janette. Her attention remained fixed on the mannequin. "Unlike Nicholah, I 've learned to play a waiting game. Submit, assent, consent . . . when you have eternity on your side, how long is a century or two, really?" When she turned, she was frowning. "Our accident won't fool him, but it will make it difficult to follow us. He'll need to change his plans, come up with a way to track us."

"Which will keep him busy." Natalie didn't have to add the obvious-- if they kept LaCroix thinking, he wouldn't have any leisure in which to torment Nick.

When she looked up, Janette was nodding, as if she'd read her thoughts. "You learn fast. And you must learn even faster. You still have the lighter?"

"Do you want it?" asked Natalie, digging in her coat pocket.

Janette waved at her. "No, keep it. It will be safer with you." As if suddenly spotting something, Janette walked past her, to a row of shelves that held boxes of every shape and size. "Remember, LaCroix will always underestimate you. You're only mortal, after all—"

"Gee, thanks."

The comment earned her a sharp look. "Let us hope that you remain so." Her attention went back to the boxes and she withdrew one from the shelf. "While you run your errands, I'll make a few calls. We'll prepare for tonight."

"And then what do you want me to do?"

"Stay here." Janette carried the box to the desk and Natalie followed. "Not that I expect you to obey me—" she added quickly, when Natalie opened her mouth to protest. "But if we survive, you'll be able to tell Nicholah that I tried to stop you."

Her protest turned into a smile of camaraderie. "Yeah. And what will I really be doing?"

Janette lifted the cover from the box and peered into the interior. The side was just high enough so that Natalie couldn't see. "I think Nicholah calls it 'backing up'?"

Natalie took a step forward, craning her neck as Janette reached inside the box. "Back up," she corrected. "Then, you're going to be the bait?"

"LaCroix wants me, not you. If you fall under his gaze, submit and cower. He'll ignore you. You'll know what to do when the time comes to strike." Shaking her head, Janette sighed again. "Questions, questions, questions! Will you do me the honor of answering one of mine?"

Natalie met Janette's gaze evenly. "Try me." She watched intently as Janette pulled a wig from the box.

"Have you ever considered going blonde?"

Part 12

by Barbara Reid and Karin Welss

At Janette's secret salon:

"Oh, no!" wailed Natalie as she looked in the mirror, despite having braced herself for the worst.

Janette's reflection threw Natalie a cold look. "It might have been worse," she said, pointedly. "I might have let Myra do your hair."

And she didn't mean Schanke's well-meaning wife. A vision of the punk vampire Myra's half-shaved head rose in Natalie's vision, and she swallowed, hard.

"Um, yeah," Natalie wasn't quite ready to concede to the vampire woman, but the deed had been done. She touched the newly straight blonde strands framing her face with a sigh (thank God it was only a wig!), gathered up the rest of her disguise, and followed Janette out the door. On her way out, she grabbed the the Fabergé table lighter and stuffed it in her over-sized purse despite Janette's suggestion that she leave it at the salon.

"What now?" she asked Janette, rubbing at the half-healed puncture wounds on her neck. Somehow she had always thought it would be Nick who . . . she shivered and pushed away the thought. Janette had caused her no lasting harm; she was still mortal. For now.

But she was feeling ineffably weary. A vampire snack, a car chase followed by a car crash, flying across Toronto slung over Janette's shoulder like a sack of grain, and now this . . .

"Now we find a phone booth, and try seeing if Nicholas is home yet," Janette said, pronouncing his name Nee-co-lah, as always. "Although I doubt it . . . LaCroix was most unhappy when I saw him, and I was not the one who tried to kill him . . ."

This time, it was Janette who shivered.

Natalie looked somber. "I should probably call Schanke, and let him know that we think Nick's in trouble," she suggested.

Janette threw her a disgusted glance, but did not protest.

* * *

The phone rang in Nick's flat, and LaCroix stopped what he was doing when he heard Janette's voice. He put aside the bottle of blood he had poured over Nick's face, touched the sticky mess with terrifyingly gentle fingers, and licked the spilled blood from his fingers with a smirk at Nick's helpless glare.

Both of them heard the frantic note that Janette was unable to entirely keep from her voice: "Nicolas, are you there?"

"Stupid," LaCroix said softly, shaking his head in mock sympathy. "But then again, she always did have a soft spot for you, Nicholas."

LaCroix left Nick's side, strolled over to the phone, and picked up the receiver.

"Why, hello again, my dear," he said in honeyed tones, smiling at Janette's shocked intake of breath. "As a matter of fact, we're both here– enjoying a reunion of sorts. But I'm getting tired of your little games. I suppose you didn't know that I own the building where you lease space for the Raven. If you want to keep your little tavern, you'll meet me at your office in precisely fifteen minutes . . . and you'll bring me what I want."

Nick could hear Janette sputter a French obscenity at the other end of the line. LaCroix only smiled, his blue eyes looking almost innocent, and waited for Janette to capitulate. Which she did, reluctantly.

"Very well," she almost spat out the words. "Fifteen minutes."

"There, now," LaCroix sneered. "You needn't have gone through the trouble of wrecking that beautiful Porsche of yours. Nor killing poor Doctor Lambert in the crash . . . Do you think Nicholas will ever be able to forgive you for that? I don't."

LaCroix hung up the receiver, and retrieved his coat from where it lay draped over Nick's armchair. "Au revoir, Nicholas," he said, merrily, to the bound form. "I have a pressing engagement, but I'll come back and play later. Not that you're likely to go anywhere without me."

He slid open the door to the elevator, and then turned around one last time. "Try not to worry too much about your fate," he smirked. "What I have planned for you is much, much worse that you could possibly imagine. Let's just say that I look forward to . . . exercising my creativity."

Helpless in the embrace of the inscribed silver chains, Nick closed his eyes in despair. Natalie was dead.

And it was his fault she had been drawn into the dark vampire world in the first place.

"Nat, I'm sorry. I didn't want it to end this way," he whispered into the shadows of his empty loft apartment. "You deserved better than what I brought you."

Nick's blue eyes snapped open, molten cobalt, then golden with vampire rage. "LaCroix, I'll make you pay for this. I swear it."

* * *

Part 13

by Barbara Reid and Karin Welss

"It's ringing. Good." Janette held the phone wedged between her shoulder and her ear. The booth she stood in was on a different side of the mall from where The Salon was. She remembered the unpleasant shock of hearing LaCroix's voice on the line during her earlier phone call to Nick's apartment, and shuddered.

Natalie gave her the thumbs-up from the next booth over.

It was a good thing that they had chosen to call from a pay phone, thought Janette. You couldn't be too careful these days. Natalie hadn't been at all sure whether Nick had telephone call tracing equipment in his apartment. As a homicide detective he certainly had access to machines with that capability. But had he included them into the array of black boxes and complex devices that comprised his High Tech Dungeon of Doom? Neither of them could say for certain.

So they had ended up here, on another side hallway, far from the The Salon, in an unimportant little black booth. If LaCroix had indeed managed to trace the call, he wouldn't be led to Natalie's hiding place.

"Alma?" Janette was relieved when a familiar voice answered the phone at the Raven.

"Yeah?" Behind the voice that answered, Janette could practically hear the jaws working the bubble gum.

"Alma, quit snapping the gum!"

"Huh? Janette– JANETTE!" Inside The Raven, the tall youthful-looking redhead almost dropped her jaw. Or, rather, in an extreme moment of adrenaline, her fangs almost descended.

"Janette, is that you? Aren't you DEAD??? Hum, I mean, deader?"

"Darling, relax. It's me and I'm fine."

"Thank darkness! We all saw the news report and, gosh, I though I was going to have to manage without you. The club, I mean. I mean, we were HEARTBROKEN!" She wailed into the phone.

Even without the use of the vampiric hearing sensitivity, Janette could hear the voice while holding the phone five inches away from her ear.

"Yes, I can tell you missed me. Well, don't worry. Nothing happened. I wasn't even in that car."

"What? What happened?"

"I'm not sure, but I think that awful man-- you know, the one that was in my office when you dropped those boxes and broke all of those wine glasses-- he stole my automobile! I am just furious!" Janette began laying the foundations for the story she would later give to the police. "And insurance agents?" Natalie had giggled when Janette informed her of the game plan.

"But never mind that. Alma, I need you to do something for me right away!"

"Ah, sure. Ah, anything. Want me to come get you? Where are you?"

"No, no! I'm fine! It's my friend, Nicholas. I think he's in trouble, a real– bit of a bind."

Alma listened sharply. The nightclub owner's male friend. The cute one with the blond hair. "But, Janette, he's a cop! Why should I help him?"

"Why? Because this is ME, Janette, and I'm asking you to, that's why. And because if you want to continue to stay at my place, you'll do as I ask." *As I insist*, thought Janette.

"Ah, okay, then." The thought of having to go back to spending her days at the over-decorated museum she called "home" caused Alma to roll her eyes. Immortality did have its drawbacks occasionally– two centuries' worth of shopping expeditions had made it difficult to even open the door to the apartment.

Janette was issuing orders in her usual crisp fashion: "Go immediately to his place, at 101 Gateway Place. I think you can get in through the roof." *Why not*, Janette thought, *everyone else does*. "I've tried calling him all day, and he doesn't answer. See if he's there and see if he needs any help."

"Sure, will do."

"Be careful. The awful man who stole my car might be there, make sure he leaves before you go in. And, Alma–" Janette, paused, thinking. She could see Natalie getting nervous, shifting her weight on her feet. Obviously the police department had put her on hold. "Just a minute," she mouthed to the doctor, raising one perfectly manicured finger.

"Alma, weren't you supposed to be home today?" Watching for news reports about me on television, Janette thought. "I thought you were supposed to take the day off to clean your place."

"Janette! You know I prefer working overtime to <... shudder...> cleaning!"

"But Alma, why don't you get a housekeeper? Or a maid?"

Alma gave an embarrassed cough. "I have!"

Janette tilted her head to the side, and rolled her eyes at Natalie, who was still on "hold" at the Metro Police. "Weeellllll?" inquired Janette.

Alma giggled. "It just that they don't– last very long."

The phone clicked loudly. She had hung up. *Boy*, thought Janette, *am I glad I'm sending you after Nick. What a good choice. Into the fire, out of the cookware, yes?*

She forced a bright smile, and nodded at Natalie. "We're set, Natalie. Alma's going to check on Nick's place while LaCroix is meeting with me."

Natalie finally got through on her line. "Um, yeah. Hi, Schank. It's Nat– no, I'm fine. No, really. It's a long story, but I wasn't in that car– no, don't worry about me, I said I'm fine. But I think Nick's in trouble–"

* * *

At Nick's loft

"Hey, partner– hope you didn't mind me using your door code– Nat called me and told me I should check up on you. Said you were in danger or . . ." Schanke called out as he slid open the elevator door. "Or something."

He stopped short, and frankly stared at the sight of Alma straddled on top of a helpless Nick, who still had his wrists and ankles bound with silver chains. A large pile of discarded chains gleamed on the floor next to the black leather couch.

Schanke peered at his partner, shocked, and curious at the same time. "Man, oh man, Knight! I had no idea you were into this kind of kinky stuff."

Alma raised her head from Nick's throat, and scowled. "I was only going to have a little fun before I took the rest of them off–" just as Nick shouted, "Schank– get out of here!" He remembered his partner's last unfortunate run-in with the vampire redhead at the Raven.

Alma retracted her fangs, pouted, and reluctantly climbed off Nick's prostrate body. "Don't worry, handsome," she purred to Nick, looking at Schanke with remembered distaste. "I don't go for married men– anymore."

Schanke was struggling with a vampirically suppressed memory. "Hey, haven't I seen you somewhere before?" he asked Alma.

She bent down again, and after a sidelong glance at Schanke, smirked lasciviously and licked Nick's face from his Adam's apple to his furrowed brow, removing the last trace of LaCroix's attempts to force-feed him. Then, she sauntered towards the door in her tight, tight spandex and leather outfit. "I should be getting back to work– Janette will push me into the sunlight if I don't finish the inventory before she gets back from her little. . . adventure."

Nick tested his wrists, relieved that Alma had managed to remove the rest of the chains binding him, and finally remembered his manners.

"Oh, and Alma–" she turned around, the full red lips parting slightly, one eyebrow raised. "Thank you." Nick practically choked out those words, all too aware of Schanke's presence.

"Anytime, gorgeous," she replied softly, suggestively, tugging her miniskirt over her rounded hips. "It was . . . fun."

Nick's mouth quirked in acute embarrassment, aware that Schanke was goggling at him with a mixture of envy and amazement. "I'll bet it was," leered Schanke.

Alma paused in front of Nick's partner, tapping his tie knot suggestively with a long, lacquered fingernail. "Nice tie, detective," she breathed, standing very close to him, and giving him a sultry look out of her green eyes.

"Uh, thanks!"

Schanke's tongue was practically dragging on the floor as Alma made her exit. Nick had to remind him, twice, about removing the remaining chains.

As the last of the restraints fell jingling to the floor, Nick breathed a sigh of relief. "Don't even ask," he sighed, at Schanke's eagerly inquiring look. "It's a really long story, and we've got to get moving. I think Janette is in danger, from the same psychopath that did– *that*– to me. She's the one who called Alma and told her that I was in trouble."

"Janette– your foxy friend who runs the nightclub?" Schanke inquired, tugging at his tie. "That's weird. You know why, Knight? Because I just got a call from our other 'accident victim,' a certain Dr. Lambert, telling me to get my butt over here because she thought you were in serious trouble. And I see that I got here just in the– excuse the expression– nick of time. What I wanna know is– how come you get all the women falling all over you, Knight, and I get all the paperwork?"

"Nat's still alive!?" Nick breathed, a smile lighting his features for the first time all day. Janette had managed to keep her safe after all. Maybe his luck was changing for the better . . . but he still had to reach the two women before LaCroix did.

A brief fantasy of PI's and their partners raced through Schanke's mind as he followed Nick out of the apartment, and into the dusty orange of a Toronto twilight. At least getting stuck with the paperwork wasn't as bad as getting beaten up, he consoled himself.

Part 14

by Barbara Reid

It had taken almost no time at all to get there. Natalie was almost used now to this type of travel, but only because she never looked down.

Janette had landed them on a small side street, one block from the Raven, behind a warehouse. Now she walked quickly to it's front door, checking over her shoulder to confirm no one had seen them when they arrived. Natalie followed more slowly behind, playing backup, hugging the shadows, staying out of sight so she could be the element of surprise they might need. That they hoped they wouldn't need.

Almost at the door to the club, a large, powerfully built figure suddenly appeared and blocked the way.

Janette hissed.

He walked slowly towards her, stopping only when he was under the tall city street lamp. There were papers in his hands, and he still wore the expensive dark suit she'd seen him in the last time they'd met. That had been in her office, and she had flown quickly to get out of there. One part of her brain noted the fresh red stains on the edge of the jacket cuffs. Her vampire senses could smell it. It was fresh, too fresh. Suddenly she realized what she recognized. The stains-- they smelled like Nick!

She hissed again.

His face held no emotion as he spoke. "I'm back-- again!" Then a smile started to curve itself into shape. "Miss me? I know I've missed you!"

"Okay, I'm here. Where's Nick. I want to see him, and see him now!"

"Ah, Nicholas. Dear Nicholas. There was no need for him to be at this little transaction, so I left him safely behind. We're still partying, you know. Oh, it's quite a reunion, let me tell you, dear Janette. Pity you left so early the other day. We could have used your company." A stricken look covered his face.

She felt nauseous at the sight of it. Gritting her teeth, she said, "Is this why you wanted to see me? To gloat over your prize?" *Keep the subject away from the lighter*, she thought to herself.

"I think I told you on the phone why I wanted to see you, Janette. Dear Janette, I've gone into real estate. You'll be interested in what I've been buying." He waved the objects in his hand in front of her face. She stared at them blankly.

LaCroix handed her the papers, all inserted into bright red cardboard. "Take your time. You'll see they're all in order. I am your new landlord." He smirked.

Taking the folder gingerly she opened it, keeping one eye on LaCroix for any moves he might make. She occasionally dropped her eyes to read a paragraph or boldfaced line in the thick legal document. She gasped. There was the building deed in there, and transaction letters.

"Well," she said though her teeth, "I'm going to have my lawyer look at this. Very closely. You'll just have to wait!"

"Ha!" He laughed. "Such pointless action from you, Janette? I'm disappointed. I expected a much more proactive stance. Waiting for your lawyer, indeed!"

She flinched. Well, the thought was giving her time. Time to think. Something in the papers caught her eye. She looked at him, started.

"Our kitchen isn't up to code?"

Hiding in the shadows, Natalie shifted her weight from one Italian stiletto leather heel to the other. "The Raven's kitchen has to be redone?" she thought. "Boy, bet that won't happen too soon."

LaCroix was talking again. "Actually, the whole property will have to be brought up to standard on a number of points. Quite a few points."

As Janette looked at the evil figure standing unnecessarily under the bright lamp post, she numbly realized that the triumph in his eyes glowing since the start of their little meeting had never wavered. The Raven, The Raven! Her Raven! It was her home, her prize, her center of existence. For him to threaten it, for him to come this close to her castle and then claim it's lordship infuriated her. She hated him!

His face relaxed and he stroked a lower lip. "It's all there, Janette. It's all there and I have all the documents." He waved the second set of folders at her. The originals, she guessed. "No, you won't have a leg to stand on." Now he used one hand to repeatedly feather the papers held in the other, stroking and stroking. Then he spoke.

"And, by the way, did I mention a small . . . rent increase?"

Part 15

by John Dencoff <jdencoff@POLARIS.UNM.EDU>

"Of course, I'd be willing to drop the whole matter . . . if you simply turn over the dragon. It was a triumph in cruelty to let Nicholas 'guard' it for a time, but you are a bit more impulsive than I'd like as of late." He took a step back, gleefully letting the shadows play over his form.

"The dragon? I don't have it anymore," she hissed. "If I did, you wouldn't be standing here threatening the one thing I hold dear. I should burn these documents right now!"

"Oh, don't be that way. Besides, I could have another set drawn up within a tenday. Hand over the item."

"I am sick and tired of your interference in my life, LaCroix. I'd hoped it ended when Nicolah burned you. I was glad you were dead. I was finally free of you. But, as always, you come back . . . destroying what we try to build. You leave us nothing . . ." Janette was seething now, an anger that had been smoldering for centuries. Nat, in the shadows, drew back even further. She fiddled with the statuette in her coat pocket as she tried to circle behind and away from LaCroix.

Behind Nat, however, another figure moved . . . straining to see the exchange between LaCroix and Janette.

* * *

In Nick's car:

"Jeez, Knight! Whatta ya trying to do?" Schanke yelled as Nick pulled a 90-degree turn almost into oncoming traffic. "You may look good in basic black, but I'm not ready for the coffin yet!"

Nick just glared at him. ". . . Schank . . . never mind." And he continued his wild pace toward the Raven. What would LaCroix do to Janette this time, he wondered . . .

[flashback: Renaissance England]

"Nicolah! Is there anything you can do to seal that thing better? If it comes fully open, we'd be helpless!" she asked hopefully. They were traveling again, the three of them, in a new carriage-- courtesy of LaCroix. As per his instructions, they were making a breakneck pace toward the next village, before daybreak and certain death.

LaCroix leaned out of the window to check their progress, then barked a few commands to the driver. Turning back in, he smiled. "Do keep it safe, Nicholas. We'll be needing it shortly."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that we will be making a small detour. I need to buffer our finances a bit, as well as complete a short task," he replied mysteriously.

"Another of your games, LaCroix?" queried Janette. "I doubt we have time for anything so close to sunrise!"

"A mere moment is all it shall take, my dear, and we shall reap a great deal of wealth . . . as well as gain the favor of the Enforcers." LaCroix's smile had turned into one of wicked delight.

Nicholas shuddered. The thought of the ancients was enough to turn his heart to ice. "What is it that you're suggesting?"

"Merely that we will kill one of our own," he replied, fire dancing in his eyes. "One of our number has committed the ultimate sin, and we will correct that. Then . . . all of her amassed fortune shall be mine! And the ancient ones will be pleased!"

Nick thought about the rest of that night, so long ago. He had been party to murder . . . a beautiful woman, one of their kind. And they'd used the dragon to do it. And what was her sin? That she had married and confided her secrets to a mortal? Was that worth what LaCroix had done?

He, too, knew the pain of loneliness . . . an unending loneliness that could not end because of this vampiric curse. Again he remembered that night with Janette, when she and LaCroix had promised him everlasting life. Is that what he'd truly received, he wondered?

The car would be too slow, he knew that now. He would have to fly, but Schanke was with him. How could he get away from him and be able to explain it again?

Up ahead, he saw a small strip mall, and an idea began to form in the back of his mind. "Schank, I need you to do something for me. I'm going to stop up here at the store, because I need something for Janette. Something really important."

He stopped the car once they reached the 7-11, and Nick quickly hopped out. "You've got to be kidding. You're going to buy something for Janette at a 7-11??" Schanke said incredulously. "Don't tell me that she wants a Slurpee, it's not her style, my friend!"

Nick almost laughed out loud. "No, nothing like that. Wait here for a second. I'm going to give her a call at the Raven. I think I saw a phone in the back."

"You know, you are really strange. First you drive ninety miles an hour, then you pull off for a side trip. Really weird." He shook his head.

"Just wait in the car, okay?" Nick grumbled. Then he dashed back behind the store.

Schanke wasn't the least bit surprised when Nick hadn't returned after fifteen minutes. "I knew it!" he mumbled as he jumped into the driver's seat. He figured Nick probably dumped him again. Why did he put up with this stuff, he wondered? Then the dream about beautiful blondes and Private Investigators took over . . .

Part 16

By Barb Reid and John Dencoff

Natalie circled behind LaCroix in the shadows, the light from the lamppost perhaps blocking his view . . . or maybe he simply took no notice of a mere mortal, she thought. "Well, here's one too many that he's underestimating," she nearly said.

Janette's eyes were livid, almost glowing in the amber light. "Increase in my RENT?!?" she said incredulously. "What is it with you, LaCroix? At first, I thought it was simply control that you wanted . . . but this . . . this is ridiculous!"

"Once you called me Master, and you loved me more than life itself." He shook his head in mock defeat, then stared into her eyes. "And you shall again, my sweet. You shall beg me for forgiveness."

"You are mad. Your games tire me, LaCroix." Her voice nearly faltered. Where was that Lambert woman? Why did she trust this mortal?

Suddenly, Natalie stepped out of the darkness, and pressed her right finger into the latch that opened the jade lighter.

"DAMN!" she swore. An inch-long tongue of flame wavered from the dragon's mouth. Not only had she hit the wrong trigger on the device, now she wasn't sure she remembered how to release the dangerous second trigger. She looked up. Both Janette and the person next to her stood with their mouths hanging open. The evil man started to smile then begin laughing! "Oh, God!" prayed Natalie silently, "don't let him come near me!"

LaCroix regained his composure swiftly and took a step towards her. Adrenaline shot through her body and her hands shook with fear. She fumbled the dragon and nearly dropping it. "Where was the latch?" her mind screamed. Suddenly out of nowhere, Nick was there.

Nick Knight pulled on LaCroix's arm and spun him around.

"Leave her alone. It's me you're looking for!" LaCroix turned towards Nick with an animal snarl, his fangs extended, green light pouring from his eyes. The master vampire clenched his hands into fists and started to slowly rise above the pavement, seething in fury as he gazed contemptuously at the

two beings who had lived as vampires with him for so long and that now refused to anymore be his satellites.

Then the dragon separated, and white light erupted from inside. To Nat, it was peaceful, and she began to lose focus, becoming absorbed in the soft radiance.

"No!" screamed LaCroix, as the light poured over him and Janette. For them, the light had a far different effect. It seemed to enfold them, a fire that licked at the edges of their consciousness. It was like . . . sunlight . . . paralyzing in its warmth.

He lost his upward momentum, and drifted down, towards Natalie, fighting against the pain. Janette slowly moved away from them, seeking safety in the darkness. LaCroix grabbed Natalie by the neck, nearly pulling her wig away. "I will not fall to a mortal," he spat. "I will take your life, and your soul will be lost!"

Nick tried to rush forward, but was held back by the light, the torturous radiance making it impossible for him to move.

Natalie, however, was absorbed in the soft white light. Was this man trying to tell her something? She wished that he could feel the peace of this magnificent . . . magnificent . . . was she supposed to remember something? Something about fire. Yes . . . this dragon. Her fingers fumbled with the upper portion of the dragon, and she fingered the striker behind the dragon's mouth. Suddenly, fire erupted from it, and LaCroix released her. Fire spread up his chest, and he began to burn. The pain was intense, and as he slowly turned to flee, both Janette and Nick stood before him. They, too, were affected by the light, but they were further away.

Natalie fell to her knees, as did LaCroix. He managed to put out the flames, but this light could eventually kill him. How bitter, he suddenly thought, to be slain by one's own children. He loved them both . . . why did they block his escape? He had only wanted to teach them . . . nurture them as any father would. Soon it would be too late.

The lone figure behind Natalie moved again. She couldn't bear to watch this anymore. And, she thought, Janette would come to regret this when the Enforcers came. Straining against the light, she ran toward Natalie, intending to knock the horrible dragon from her hands. But her stiletto heel got caught in the pavement, and she tripped-- sprawling wildly into Natalie. The dragon flew up, and both Nick and Janette moved to catch it.

Janette was faster, and she braved the intense pain to hold the thing in her hands while she locked the secret compartment once again. She just couldn't believe this day . . . !

Natalie came to her senses as she realized another woman was trying to hold her down. "I can't let you kill him," Alma said. "It's wrong!"

Released by the light, the master vampire shot straight up into the air. The darkness swallowed him up quickly. He had not taken time to thank his his liberator.

Alma watched his ascent with shock. She released the blonde with the sunglasses, only half-obeying Janette's shouts to "Release her! It was a mistake! She didn't know what it was." But Alma now was watching the sky, looking for a trail, a clue, anything that would give her a direction. She rose up into the air, distracted by the hundreds of lights in the city, looking for the one flaming body that she wanted to follow.

"Hey," they heard her frustratedly say, "wait for me!" Then she too was gone.

* * *

"Nick, Nick!" Schanke called from the open ragtop window. He scraped rubber tires against the curb pulling up next to the group standing under the lamp post.

"Dammit, man, you did it to me again!" The homicide detective with the long sideburns almost tripped getting out of the green Cadillac. He'd parked on the wrong side of the street, and had misestimated that the curb was now right next to the driver's door side.

"Why'd you follow me?" Nick looked irritated.

"Hey, did you expect me to wait at that 7-11 forever?"

"So what?"

"Man, those places are dangerous! Do you know what their robbery rates are? In the midwest they call those places Stop & Shoots."

"Lay off, Schanke, just lay off!"

"Hey, what's wrong, partner? You look fit to be tied!"

Nick glared at him, then stormed off. A petite blond in an expensive European designer coat with a large handbag stood a few yards away. Schanke saw Nick walk up to her and take her hand. They talked, then the two of them walked off into the darkness. A taxi came by. The couple opened the door and got in.

Janette shrugged. "I don't think he's been eating well. Just leave him alone, he'll be okay."

But Schanke hardly heard her, much less the residual trembling in her voice. His tongue was out again, well almost.

Janette wondered whether he was going to drool on his silk tie.

"Man!" she heard him utter. "That Knight guys knows a lot more babes than he lets on!" She rolled her eyes.

"And when you got extra babes, you're supposed to do something for your buddies. Know what I mean?" Schanke examined something stuck on the bottom of his foot. He was having trouble scraping it off. "Some emergency he pulled me in on. See if I help him out again. Too bad I got my car parked at his place, or I'd take this Caddy and let him pick it up tomorrow at the office." He snorted and got back into the car.

Then he was out again, stepping around the car to come up to her. His hand grasping a large, cold looking plastic cup. Without asking he extended it to her. The cap was halfway off, leaking its contents. "I was going to give this to Knight, but he don't get it now. No no no, he don't get it at all."

Janette just stared. "It's . . . green, isn't it?" She did not unfold her arms. "I couldn't," she added weakly.

"Hey, it ain't gonna last, and I already had an orange one. Ain't nothing beats a 7-11 Slurpee. Whatever." Putting it down on the sidewalk, he was back in the car, pounding the steering wheel.

"Next time I see him, I'm gonna look at him, and I'm gonna say, Hey Knight! Where's the fire, Knight! Give me a break, Knight."

He screeched tires again as he drove off.

Janette sighed. She unfolded her arms and exposed the beautiful green dragon lighter. She'd been quick enough to catch it when Alma pushed Natalie so abruptly out of the way. The enameling on it was lovely, the gold trim flawless. Its eyes glittered as if burning with inset jewels.

She bent forward and picked up two sets of discarded folders, notes and documents. Holding the papers away from her body, she gently squeezed the large trigger. The other trigger was once again latched safely and smoothly into the main body of the dragon, hidden like a Chinese puzzle whose secret was only known to the owner.

Flames caught and licked their way across the celluloid surfaces. She dropped the edges she'd been holding just before the flames reached her her hand.

Gently she nudged the pile with a stick, making sure all of it was exposed to the flames. A light breeze helped, catching embers and charred bits of writing. She watched unhurriedly as cinders caught in an updraft floated softly into the night.

"Au revoir!" she said to the darkness above.

– The End –

Sleep of the Undead: an Aside; or, Caught in Your Knightie?

by Pamela Rush

And now, a brief aside from the nightmares of the unkindest vampire of all. Dedicated to SWC who missed it on April 1.

On black satin sheets, in black silk pajamas, he slept. And he dreamed...

* * *

Nick slipped out of bed. Actually, with silk pajamas and satin sheets, he slipped out of bed frequently; but this time, sprawling uncomfortably half awake on the floor, he realized that the horrible drumming in his head was not merely a fevered dream but an incessant summons pounded on his front door.

"Who..." he pondered muzzily, and, ". . . how did they?..."

Knight struggled to his feet, slipped (again, dammit!) down the stairs and stumbled to the door. His preternaturally keen hearing sorted out babbling voices, scuffling feet and clanking equipment. Perhaps a small but well-equipped army was encamped on his doorstep?

Cautiously, although daylight could not penetrate here, he opened the door a crack and squinted at the melee in the hallway. The building apparently had been invaded by electronically equipped lumberjacks; lights beamed and videocams whirred above a wave of plaid shirts and work boots. Nick shied from the microphone thrust at his face and took a step back, inadvertently opening the door wider.

"Hi, I'm Tom Stevens, this is master carpenter Abe Normanson, and here is our surprised home owner, Detective Nick Knight of the Toronto P.D. Welcome to 'This Old Loft'!"

* * *

Knight had finally taken refuge in his bedroom; no amount of discussion or reasonable threats had served to convince Stevens and Normanson and their swarm of carpenters, electricians, plumbers and TV technicians that they had made a grievous error. Strangely, the telephone was out of order; Nick could not flee the premises in daylight and he hesitated to use his vampiric strength to evict the unwelcome trespassers by force, especially as they would doubtlessly videotape the action. He had finally barricaded himself in the locked bedroom, waiting out the agonizingly tedious afternoon hours through the constant cacophony of ripping, crashing, whirring, sawing, drilling, hammering and possibly ridin', ropin' and brandin' that infested his apartment.

Sometime after he had begun to sense the lowering dusk, the pandemonium outside his bedroom paused, stuttered, started up again but then dropped off to a muted roar followed soon by a low hum and then, finally, silence. Or nearly so. Footsteps clamored up the stairs and approached his door.

A hesitant rap on the door accompanied a light baritone voice:

"Uh, Mr. Knight, it's traditional for the home owner to join us on a sort of overview of the project, a final walk through. Why don't you come out now so we can wrap up?"

A sudden sense of panic made Knight want to hide under the bed until the next century but he forced himself to open the door calmly instead. Stevens continued as though besieged and panic-stricken home owners were his daily fare, as perhaps they were.

"Fine, just step this way and don't look straight at the cam. As you can see, Mr. Knight, the decorator took one look at this old dungeon of high-tech doom and knew that the first priority would be to lighten it up. And, of course, all that sort of medieval monastic stuff and those big, dark oils had to go."

Knight's stupefied gaze swept unbelievingly over a completely renovated loft apartment. White-washed stucco, terra cotta tile and bright southwestern patterns dominated every view or at least put up a good fight against the occasional Laura Ashely print. Bent twigs and shorn cattle horns were contorted into unnatural shapes to counterfeit table and various seats that were in turn adorned with flowered, ruffled throw pillows. Faux cowboy paraphernalia accented the monstrous transformation. It looked like Frank Lloyd Wright had been smoking peyote.

"The style," continued the young television host as the videocam whirred on, "is the best of eclectic Sante Fe urban-east with just a touch of chintz."

Knight heard someone whimpering hopelessly; he was afraid it was himself.

"Notice how all the lines direct your eye to focus on the oversized collage over the firepit. The neo-post-modern-deconstructionist statement really sets the tone for the whole living area. It's fabricated entirely out of old neckties donated by your partner, Detective Schanke."

"Oh, no!" gasped Nick, overcome.

"Oh, yes!" Stevens assured him.

"Oh, gross!" the cameraman muttered aside. Knight's churning stomach could only lurch in sincere but revolted accord.

"Yes," Stevens continued, "it was created specially for this project by our guest interior decorator, Mr. Cross."

"Who???!!!" shrieked Nick.

"Oh, sorry; I was under the impression that you knew him? In fact, I thought that he had made the arrangements for... well, never mind. It was Mr. Cross... of Cross, LaCrocks & Cousins, the well-known Latvian interior decorators. He'd like to be here now, of course, but, umm, something or other came up... Now also note the tremendous improvement this will make..." continued Stevens, sighting up his pointing finger towards the roof. Knight's eyes followed his direction apprehensively.

"No, oh, no. Please, please..." Knight whispered in anguish. Thousands of lights twinkled down at him, reflected back from hundreds of panes of glass in the dozens of skylights piercing the high ceiling of the loft. "No, oh, no. This must be some terrible, terrible nightmare..."

* * *

He woke up screaming.

And who dares sleep now?

--The End--

Bless Me Father, For I Have Sinned

by Lizbeth Marcs

(Editor's note:

The following story deals with a subject that some people are a bit sensitive about -- religion and religious belief. While I believe that much about Nick's character is tied up in his beliefs about God and Redemption, I realize that some folks may be a bit uncomfortable with the following. Neither Lizbeth nor myself wish to cause any kind of "flame war" however; and thus this explanation, so if you think you might find this kind of discussion uncomfortable, you might want to skip on to the next story. I hope you won't, though, because I find this story to be very thought-provoking in its exploration of Divine Forgiveness, even for the worst of sins.

You have been warned...

--Valery)

Here's my first foray into FK fanfic, written in a feverish state of mind on an early Saturday morning (WAY too early). Someone has got to stop the posts on Catholicism on other lists. It makes my brain go haywire.

(With apologies to the BBC and to whomever started the whole thread about Catholicism on the other list.)

Liz-Hazel

Father Neil Boyd was new to the Church of St. Agnes in Toronto. Fresh from the seminary and involved in what Father Dudeswell called, "The Baptism Of Fire. Your first confessional."

At first there was a string of innocent men, women and children, all confessing to minor sins of word, thought and deed. Sins that Father Boyd himself deemed unworthy to bother the Lord with for absolution, but sins the Church had deemed of great import for centuries. He quickly gave absolution and the standard penance of 10 Hail Marys, 10 Our Fathers and 10 Glory Bes.

The last half-hour was dead, however, and Father Boyd constantly had to fight to keep his eyes open and his chin from drooping on his chest. Though he could not see the outside world from his dark confessional booth, he could sense the early sunset and darkness of mid-winter.

He was rudely shaken to his senses at the sound of a scuffling body fleeing into the confessional next to him. He peered through the grille work, catching a flash of a blond man, and began the process.

"In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit," he began, making the sign of the cross. Was it his imagination, or did the figure on the other side of the grille flinch?

He waited for the answering call of "Bless me father, for I have sinned," a tradition so drilled into Catholics the world over that Father Boyd had begun to wonder whether anyone really understood the import behind the phrase.

The figure hesitated, as if unsure what to say, but finally remained silent. The only answer it gave was an embarrassed cough.

Father Boyd decided that it must've been a *very* long time since this Catholic walked into a confessional and tried to make the experience easier for the penitent. "How can I help you, my son?"

"Please excuse me, Father. It's, it's, it's been a long time since my last confession. Too long. The English. It threw me off."

Father Boyd peered more carefully through the grille work again, to see if he had misjudged the age of the man on the other side. Latin had not been spoken in these booths since Vatican II. He got the impression of youth, or rather, of someone in their 30s. Certainly someone who would be too young to remember Latin spoken at Mass.

The voice was warm, enticing almost, if somewhat hesitant. Though the language was English, it had layers of other languages behind it. A touch of the Queen's English perhaps? French? Was there a catch of German somewhere? Irish? Maybe Welsh? It was hard to tell.

"That's quite all right, my son. I am here to help," Father Boyd said in the calm reassuring tone he had given to all his penitents that day. "How long has it been since your last confession?"

The figure shifted uncomfortably. "It's been, let me think. With my memory you'd think I could remember," he said. It was obvious the man was embarrassed. "It's been 764 years since my last confession."

Father Boyd sighed. There is one in every Church. Obviously Father Dudeswell sent him a plant to see how he'd deal with outrageous claims or the mentally disturbed. Very well, then. He would pass the test.

"I see," the priest said. "And what is your sin, my son?"

"I'm a vampire."

Father Boyd felt the hair on his arms stand up straight, his skin go cold and a gibbering fear in the back of his mind. There was no doubt in his mind that this man, if man he was, was speaking the truth.

His mind reeled at the impossibility of it all. After all, there were no vampires, were there? None at all. A quaint Eastern European myth. Bela Lugosi. That's it. Vampires, if there are any, would not come to Toronto. They'd go to New York, Los Angeles, the bloody battlefields of the world, Chicago, even. But *not* Toronto.

But the part of him that had dedicated his life to the Divine Mysteries of the Church, the mind that could be coldly sensible in real life, but could believe in the possibility of a Trinity, a Virgin Birth and the changing of bread and wine into body and blood, *believed*.

"Father?" ventured a concerned voice on the other side of the grille.

Was it Father Boyd's imagination, or did that voice have a touch of fear in it? The priest wanted to laugh out loud. This man, creature, whatever, could kill him without a thought and he, or it, was afraid.

"I'm here," the priest said. He hated himself for the shaky quality his voice had taken on. "You took me by surprise, that's all."

The figure started on the other side of the grille, as if surprised by the answer, but remained in the box.

Father Boyd continued. "Since I've never heard of anyone dealing with such a problem before, I guess I'm going to have to compare you to another group."

"You mean a comparison can be made?" Was that contempt in the voice?

"Ah, I know," the priest said. "Homosexuals."

The figure snorted.

"According to Canon Law, homosexuality is a neutral state. It is the practice itself that is a sin, since there can be no sex outside of marriage and the Church does not recognize homosexual marriages."

"A pretty catch-22," the voice floated back.

Father Boyd fought the urge to agree. Instead, he continued his thread. "Therefore, it would seem to me, being a vampire is a neutral state. It would be practicing vampirism that would be the sin."

The voice bitterly laughed. "You're a little late. You can't live as long as I have and not killed."

The priest curled his hands into fists, the nails biting into his palms, in an effort to fight down the panic. "I see. Then when was the last time you. . ."

"Killed?" the voice finished for him. "Killed to feed, almost a century ago. Killed? A few months ago."

"There's a difference?" Father Boyd, despite himself, was getting interested. He wasn't sure if it was the situation or the hypnotic voice.

"A woman, a friend, she's trying to help me stop. . . being what I am," the man, or thing, chose its words carefully. "Her brother, he was dying. She begged me to save him. To make him like me. I tried to resist. I told her it was a mistake. I did it anyway."

"You mean to tell me that this woman, this friend of yours, knows *what* you are?" Father Boyd was stunned.

"Yes." The voice was small, soft, sad.

"Please, please, continue," the priest urged.

"He became a, well, like me. He killed. I had to stop him before more lives were lost."

"You killed him?"

"You can't kill something already dead," the voice answered, matter-of-factly.

"Do you believe you are dead?" the priest asked.

Silence.

"Then if you are dead, why are you here?"

"I don't know. Maybe I should go. This was a mistake." The figure made to move.

"Wait! Wait!" Father Boyd said. "Not yet. Sit down. Or kneel. Whatever."

The figure settled down and waited.

"How many have you killed?'

"Hundreds, maybe a thousand. I don't know. You lose track over the course of 800 years." The sadness again.

The priest sat there. For a terrible moment, he felt the burden of this man's sin, a guilt that would weigh down the world. He looked to the crucifix for help, but the bronze figure of a crucified savior gave no answers and offered no advice.

"Would we blame the lion for killing the lamb?"

"I'm sorry?" the voice said quickly.

"Forgive me. I was thinking aloud," the priest said. He leaned forward, trying to get a better look, wishing he could reach through the grille and touch the wondrous creature on the other side.

"You cannot live in the past, my son. The murders -- yes, they were murders -- ended a century ago, by your count. Though technically, there is no statute of limitations on murder, I would imagine that no one would believe you if you publicly confessed."

Father Boyd looked at his hands. His next words would have to be chosen carefully. Very carefully. "That you have not killed to feed, as you put it, for over a century, gives you a bit of leeway here. Though I'm sure there are more than a few, both in and out of this Church, that might think otherwise."

He looked through the grille again. "What do you do now?"

"I'm a cop."

"A blue knight," Father Boyd said thoughtfully.

"A dark knight," the man corrected.

"But a protector nonetheless," Father Boyd answered. "Seems you are making your own penance here. A job requiring you to protect life, not take it. A search to stop being a vampire. A stop to the killing. These are not small steps and it is a start."

Father Boyd sat up. "Go in peace my son. Do not kill again."

He was met with a stunned, dead silence on the other side. The voice, small again, asked, "What?"

"I cannot grant absolution," the priest said quietly. "That you must do for yourself first."

"Forgive myself?" the voice asked incredulously.

"I know it sounds heretical, but even God cannot forgive a man who is not willing to forgive himself," the priest said. "Go, with my blessing and my sympathy."

The figure stood up. The voice was strong and sure, for the first time since the man had walked into the confessional. "Thank you, Father. If I had a soul, I would pray for help."

Then like smoke, he was gone.

And Father Boyd put his head in his hands and cried.

--The End--

What Price Mortality?

by Rebecca Rauscher

Natalie pulled a sheet over the corpse she had been working on, and wiped her hands on her smock.

"I'm pretty sure the Cabrini file is in the pile on the desk, it shouldn't take me too long to find it," she answered Nick's query. She walked over to the desk, which held a stack of files nearly two feet high, as well as the remains of a fast-food dinner, an empty coffee mug, a purse, assorted papers and other junk. Instead of looking through the stack of files, Natalie started rummaging through her purse. "As long as you're here, I have something I've been meaning to give you," she said into the bag.

From the tone of her voice, Nick knew he was in trouble. "A present, for me? Gee, I didn't get you anything..."

Natalie found what she was looking for and held out the bottle of pills. Nick took the bottle and examined it, looking up at Natalie with quizzical expression.

"They're protein pills. I figure, if you have another source of nourishment, you ought to be able to stop drinking the blood, or at least drink less of it. There's absolutely nothing in those that could hurt you. Girl Scout's honor." She added, seeing the worried look cross his face as he remembered how sick the garlic pills she had given him before had made him. "Just take two of those pills when you get home in the morning, and two more when you wake up in the evening, instead of heading for the fridge."

"If you say so... I'll try anything," Nick replied, setting the bottle down on the edge of the desk. "Now, what about that Cabrini file? I need to do some follow-up work on that case tonight."

Natalie found the file near the top of the heap, and handed it across the desk to Nick. As he turned to leave, she had to remind him "Hey Nick! Don't forget those pills." Nick turned back, picked up the bottle from the corner of the desk, and put it in his pocket as he headed for the door.

"Yes, Doctor," he responded, as he disappeared out the door.

* * *

Nick closed the door behind him and picked up his remote control. He walked over to the window, and gazed out at the grey sky. In the east, an orangish glow hinted at the coming sunrise. Nick closed the blinds and walked towards the kitchen.

As he opened the refrigerator and reached for a bottle, he remembered the pills Natalie had given him the previous evening. He opened the bottle and examined the brownish pills. They looked harmless enough. Summoning his courage, and bracing for the worst, he popped one of the pills into his mouth and swallowed. Nothing.

Remembering Natalie's instructions, he swallowed a second pill and left the bottle on the kitchen counter. The pills did nothing to sate his hunger, and he stared indecisively at the fridge for a moment before convincing himself to skip dinner. After all, if Nat was right, he didn't really *need* the

blood. It was a big *if*, but for the moment he was giving her the benefit of the doubt. After all, she was the only one offering any hope.

He headed for the couch, trying to put some distance between himself and the fridge before he lost his resolve. He had intended to watch the morning news before going up to bed, but it had been a long night and he was very tired. He stretched out on the couch with the remote and fell asleep before the first set of commercials had ended.

* * *

Nick opened his eyes and saw a beautiful woman hovering over him. The name Janette came to him, though he wasn't sure how he knew her. And, just as surely as he knew that his own name was Nicholas, he knew that this woman was trouble. He wasn't sure how he knew that, either, but he was so certain of it that he tried to push her away, to tell her to leave him alone. His tongue felt thick, his throat dry, and speech was difficult. He had the feeling that she couldn't understand him.

The woman laid her hand on the side of his face, and spoke in a smooth, cool voice. But Nick couldn't concentrate on the words, and he struggled to push her hand away, to shrink as far back from her as he could. He closed his eyes, exhausted by the effort. When he opened them again a moment later, there was another face staring at him. This face seemed far less threatening, and he relaxed and let this second woman comfort him. He had a fleeting thought of the name Natalie, before he drifted back into darkness and sleep.

* * *

Janette awoke with a start. She glanced at her clock and saw that it was still only mid-afternoon. She had been dreaming, of Nicholas. Something was very wrong with her friend, she could sense it. She got out of bed and called him at home, but the only answer was his annoying machine. "Nicholah, pick up the phone... now, Nicholah..."

He had to be home... where else would he be in the middle of the afternoon? What terrible thing could be causing the tension she was feeling? She hung up the receiver, and had another idea. Picking up the phone again, she called information and asked for the number of Natalie Lambert. If anyone would know what was up with Nicholah besides herself, it would be the coroner.

When she dialed Natalie's number, she got another blasted machine. "Dr. Lambert, this is Janette, Nicholah's friend... I've been trying to call him, but I can't reach him and I'm a bit worried about him. Perhaps you could, um, check up on him for me?" Still several hours before sunset, she couldn't do anything else until then. So she headed down to the bar for a drink.

* * *

"Hi, honey, I'm home!" Natalie called as she walked into her apartment. Sydney appeared and began to rub against her legs, causing her to almost trip over him as she walked into her living room to collapse on the couch. She kicked her shoes off and got comfortable. "Did you have a good day?" she asked the cat, picking him up to scratch behind his ears. Noticing the blinking light on her answering machine, she hit the <PLAY> button, and almost dropped the cat when she heard the message. Immediately, she tried to call Nick, but after yelling at his answering machine and getting no answers from it, she put her shoes back on and headed back out the door.

* * *

The sun had just set when Natalie arrived at Nick's place. She didn't bother to announce herself, she just entered his passcode and proceeded into what Schanke called his "high tech dungeon of doom." As the elevator door opened, she saw that Janette was already there, crouching over the couch. She looked up as Natalie stepped into the room.

"I just arrived, and found him like this," she announced, nodding toward the couch, where Nick appeared to be sleeping. But as Nat got closer she realized that, if he was sleeping, he must be having one heck of a nightmare. He was mumbling hoarsely, in what sounded like it might be French, and trying to push Janette away, simultaneously trying to shrink farther into the corner of the couch.

"Why don't you let me wake him up?" Natalie suggested, shoeing Janette away from the couch. Janette backed away and watched, as Natalie gently shook Nick, saying his name. She withdrew her hand from his shoulder in surprise, then reached out and touched his face. He was damp with sweat, as she knew he frequently was when he woke from a nightmare. But there was something more... he was warm. Really warm, like a fevered child.

"Nick, can you hear me?" she asked him, hoping for a coherent reply. But the only reply she got was a soft moan, and then there was only silence.

Since her first words as Nat had come into the room, Janette had stood silently, staring at Nick. As Nat looked up at her now, she saw that the usually unflappable woman wore an expression of shock, or perhaps fear.

"Janette? What –"

"Shh! *Listen*!" Janette hissed, cutting Natalie off mid-sentence. A moment later, as the doctor tried in frustration to hear anything beyond the silence, Janette realized her mistake. Of course Natalie's inferior human ears wouldn't hear the pounding drums that assaulted her own senses. "Nicolah..." she started to explain. She paused, bewildered, unable to fully comprehend her own observation. "His heart is..." She stopped again, unwilling to finish. Could it really be happening? She had been so sure that his dreams had been just that... foolish fantasies. She had been certain that one day he would come to his senses, give up his ridiculous notions of rejoining the human race, finally accept what they were, and be grateful for it.

Never, in all her centuries, had she imagined that something like this could be possible.

* * *

Natalie didn't wait for Janette to continue. She had a feeling that, for perhaps the first time in a very long time, the vampire was lost for words. She took Nick's hand in her own, and felt for a pulse. It wasn't hard to find. His heart was finally beating, racing along unevenly and much too fast by even human standards.

Countless times she had imagined this moment, and always she had envisioned her excitement, she had never once considered that it would worry her so much. Noting that his temperature seemed to be rising, and that his face was flushed, and that he had begun trembling, she couldn't help but wonder if they had been wrong. Perhaps it wasn't possible for someone to return to the living, after 800 years among the undead. Maybe, in her attempt to help her friend recover his life, she had only succeeded in hastening his death.

Natalie shrugged off these pessimistic thoughts, and tried to figure out what to do. Obviously she couldn't take him to the hospital, which is what she would do if she found anyone else in this condition. She'd have to do the best she could for him here.

She hurried to the kitchen, where she got out the popcorn bowl she often used when she came over to watch movies with Nick. She filled it with cold water from the tap, and rummaged through the drawers until she found some dishtowels. Bringing the water and a towel, she started back towards the living room, but stopped abruptly when she noticed the bottle of pills sitting on the counter.

Quickly scanning the label, she realized what had happened. Nick had taken the wrong bottle. For an instant, Natalie wondered whether the mistake would cure him or kill him. But there was no point in dwelling on that now.

She returned to the couch and knelt beside it, placing the cold, wet towel on Nick's forehead. She would just wait for his fever to break. It would. It had to. She had completely forgotten about Janette, who still stood in the corner, like a statue, watching her.

* * *

The night seemed to Natalie to stretch on forever, as she sat beside Nick. He spent most of the long hours asleep, occasionally mumbling incoherently in a variety of languages. For a short time, Nat allowed Janette to take over the vigil, while she curled up in the chair by the couch for a restless nap. Throughout the night, his temperature gradually came down, and his heart rate slowed to normal human levels, its rhythm becoming a bit more regular. It was nearly morning when Nick finally opened his eyes and recognized Natalie hovering above him.

"Nat?" he asked, so softly she could barely hear him.

"Good morning," she replied with a smile.

"Is it morning?" he asked, turning his head in an effort to see the clock. But his gaze fell upon Janette, who had begun reading his books when it became clear there was nothing useful she could do.

She set the book aside now, and looked at him. "Well, Nicholah," she said in a slightly annoyed tone, "I trust that you have learned your lesson, and are done with these foolish games. You will only bring yourself more grief if you continue this silly quest for mortality."

Despite her words, he could tell that she was worried about him. And he was confused. What had happened? The last thing he remembered was... those pills. They must be responsible for the weakness he felt now, as well as the concern of his friends. "Nat, what —" he had started to sit up, when a terrible pain seized him. Clutching his chest, he fell back onto the cushions.

Janette was beside him in an instant. But she addressed her next statement to Natalie. "I will not stand by and watch Nicholah die. I have waited this long out of... curiosity. But if I must continue to listen to his heart doing flip-flops very much longer, I will put a stop to this... experiment." She looked down at Nicholah, who opened his eyes again and gazed up at her.

"Please, Janette... don't." It was unlike Nicholah to beg, but his pleading now was quite sincere. Did he realize what he was asking for?

"Hmph" was her only response, as she turned and stalked back to the other side of the room. It didn't matter what he thought he wanted. He was obviously not in his right mind. Perhaps she should simply get rid of the coroner and take care of Nicholah herself. She could put an end to this so quickly... it would only take one delicious bite... But Nicholah might never forgive her for that. And she knew what happened to those who got on his bad side. She shuddered, remembering LaCroix. No, she would wait. Only at the last minute, if he was truly in danger of dying, would she interfere.

* * *

"Well, if I didn't know better, I'd think I just examined a normal human male suffering from severe arrhythmia," Natalie announced, as she stepped back from Nick. "I'd tell you to go see a specialist. How do you feel now?"

"A lot better than I did an hour ago," he replied. "I still feel, well, strange. A little dazed. And I'm still having some chest pains," he added. As he talked, he put his shirt back on and buttoned it up.

"Well, what do you expect? A heart that hasn't beat in nearly 800 years got quite a workout in the last 30 hours or so. Let's just hope it keeps on beating." Natalie was very hopeful. She was still having a hard time believing this wasn't all a dream. She suspected Nick felt the same way. Janette seemed to be having an even more difficult time dealing with all of this, although when it had become apparent that Nick's condition was improving and his life was no longer in imminent danger, she had left. Of course, she had made it quite plain that she would be back the moment there was a problem. Actually, Natalie was glad. It was nice to have a safety net... to know that if something did go wrong, Janette could probably reverse the damage. After all, Nick as a vampire was better than no Nick at all.

"You know what, Nat?" Nick interrupted her thoughts. "I'm famished. Would you care to celebrate with me over lunch?"

Natalie smiled. "Well, I suppose it's a good sign that you're hungry..." she started, "and I'd love to celebrate with you. But you're still running a fever, and you got wiped out just walking upstairs. I think you probably ought to stay at home and get some rest. How about I run to the grocery instead, and bring us back something? What sounds good to you?"

"You're probably right." Nick responded resignedly. "You know, I have this craving for fresh fruit... a crisp, juicy apple sounds really good."

* * *

Natalie returned from the store with two bags full of groceries. When she let herself into Nick's apartment, she saw that he had cleaned the place up.

Before unpacking the bags, she checked on her friend. Freshly showered and shaved, he had fallen asleep on the couch again. He looked so childlike, sleeping peacefully. It was hard to believe that he was really eight centuries old. As she stood there watching him, he opened his eyes and returned her gaze. Those eyes had lost none of their intensity. They were as deep as ever.

"Finally. I was thinking about sending a search party out for you. Do you always spend this long at the grocery? I'm starving!"

Natalie laughed, glancing at her watch. "I was gone less than an hour, " she responded, "I wanted to get enough to last a few days. After all, you can't keep an empty cupboard anymore!"

Taking his wrist in her hand, she felt for his pulse. It had slowed a bit since she had left, so that it was almost too slow to be a normal human heartbeat. Almost, but not quite. A little bit worried, she touched her hand to his forehead. He was still feverish. But he looked much better than he had an hour ago, and he still claimed to be hungry, so she released the hand she was still holding and headed back to the kitchen. "Ok, one apple coming up," she announced.

Nick followed her to the kitchen, and peered into the grocery bags she had left on the counter. Poking around, he pulled out a loaf of bread and undid the twisty-tie that held the bag closed. Taking out a slice, he tore off a bite and put it into his mouth. Nat watched him as she pulled out milk and cheese and put them into the refrigerator, pushing the bottles of red liquid to the back. As she started to relegate the various cans and jars to cabinet shelves, he continued to eat the bread, tearing off one bite at a time, chewing and swallowing. Natalie could tell from his expression that he was deep in some thought or memory. When he was down to his last bite, she finally broke the silence.

"Nick, what are you thinking about?"

Nick looked up at her, startled. "I was remembering... my last meal. We had quite a feast that night. It was so *long* ago." Finishing off the last bite of his bread, he returned his gaze to Natalie. "I guess I'm just having a little trouble believing this is real."

Natalie pulled a bag of apples from the bottom of the grocery bag and rinsed one off in the sink before handing it across the counter to Nick. "I know what you mean. But it's real enough. I *told* you we could do this, didn't I?"

* * *

Nick had taken a seat at the kitchen table to eat his apple, and when the groceries were all put away Natalie joined him with a cup of yogurt.

"How's the apple?" she asked, wondering what it must be like for him to enjoy a simple piece of fruit for the first time in centuries.

"It's good," he answered, studying it for a moment before taking another bite. "I remembered them being sweeter," he added, after considering her question. He didn't sound disappointed, he was just stating a fact. But Natalie wondered how many things he had built up in his memory, how many things he would find were not what he remembered them, or imagined them, to be.

He finished his apple in silence and stood, discarding the core before walking over to the window. Pulling back the blinds, he looked out at the afternoon. The sun streamed through the cracked blinds, and his first impulse was to jerk his hand away. But he slowly moved his hand back into the light, turning it palm up and examining it as if he'd never seen it before.

Natalie had finished her yogurt and approached the window, and she was right behind him when he started trembling.

"Nick? Are you okay?" she inquired.

Before responding, he grabbed the window sill for support and leaned his forehead against the wall. "I'm just a little dizzy," he answered quietly.

Natalie took his arm and led him back to the couch, where he collapsed.

"Nick? Talk to me," she commanded, her voice laced with worry.

"I'm okay... just tired." But he didn't sound okay. He sounded like he was in pain, and as though he was having trouble catching his breath, and Natalie noted that his heart rate was up again.

The two of them spent the rest of the afternoon talking, watching movies, and even playing some parchisi. Nick dozed off several times, and he was sound asleep when Natalie started getting hungry for dinner. She made herself some spaghetti, and just as she sat down to eat Nick began to stir.

"Something smells really good," he mumbled sleepily. He sat up and looked around, noticing Natalie in the kitchen. "Did you make enough for me?" he asked, starting to get up.

"Stay where you are. I'll get you a plate," Natalie ordered him. She put just a little bit of pasta on his plate and brought it in to him with a glass of water. She wasn't sure whether or not it was a good idea for a recovering ex-vampire with a fever to be eating spaghetti, but she could hardly refuse to feed him. After being on a 'liquid' diet for nearly 800 years, she didn't think he'd appreciate being told he had to stick to jello and toast until he shook his fever. She joined him on the couch, and together they enjoyed their dinner.

* * *

Nick seemed to get a little stronger as the evening wore on, but he was still in no condition to go to work; so he called in sick yet again. Afraid to leave him alone until he was fully recovered, Natalie spent another night sleeping in his living room. She awoke shortly after dawn to find Nick already up and dressed, staring out the window. When she stood up, he turned to face her.

"I'm sorry... did I wake you?"

"No. Actually, I slept quite well. Your couch is pretty comfortable," she answered with a grin. Then she noticed that he had his coat on. "Going somewhere?" she asked.

"Yeah. I just haven't figured out where yet," he answered. At her questioning glance, he continued, "It'd be a shame to waste all that beautiful sunshine." He nodded towards the window.

She had been surprised that he hadn't insisted on going outside yesterday, but then yesterday he'd barely had the strength to make it to the door. It came as no surprise to her today that he wanted to get out. He certainly looked much better today.

"Okay, tell you what... I'll make us some breakfast, then we can walk to that little park down the street." She wasn't going anywhere without her morning cup of coffee.

The short walk to the little grove of trees and patch of grass that passed as a small park was enough to wear Nick out, so they sat on the grass and watched the world go by for awhile. For the most part, Natalie watched Nick, and Nick watched the children playing, the men walking their dogs and the women jogging. They both lay back and studied the fluffy white clouds for awhile, and Nick marvelled at the criss-cross of silver paths left by airplanes. Finally, Nick propped himself up on one elbow and looked down at Natalie.

"Natalie --" he started, a bit hesitantly. "I don't know how..." he paused again, searching for the right words. "Thank you." That hardly seemed to scratch the surface of what he wanted to say, but he was completely at a loss as to how to put into words what he felt. Instead, he did something he had spent the last hundred years trying desperately to avoid – he stopped thinking and allowed himself to act on instinct. Leaning over to close the short distance between them, he kissed her. And for a time, they both stopped thinking, forgot the sun, forgot the children, forgot the joggers, and enjoyed each other.

Finally, they left the park and returned to Nick's warehouse. If the walk to the park had worn Nick out, the walk home left him completely exhausted. But he was happier than he could remember being ever before. Just as Natalie slid the door open and they walked inside, Nick grabbed at the door

frame for support. A moment later, his shaking body doubled over in pain, and Natalie barely caught him before he crashed to the floor. With her help, he managed to make it to the couch, but there he collapsed in a fetal position, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

A quick examination told Natalie that his fever had spiked again, and his heart rate was as fast and erratic as it had been two nights ago. Eventually, his breaths became more even, his muscles relaxed, and he slept fitfully.

Again she tried to calm him while he muttered foreign phrases in his delirium, and she watched him anxiously when he slept. Several hours later, he finally woke up.

He was wiped out, but the fever was gone. Again he was hungry, but it was a different kind of hunger... the kind he was used to, the kind he had hoped to never feel again. The need burned deep within him, and he summoned his strength and trudged to the refrigerator. Angrily, he pushed aside the food and pulled out a bottle. As he drank, he tried to ignore the look of disappointment on Natalie's face, but it was as difficult as ignoring his own despair.

* * *

Natalie knew, even before he woke up, what was happening. She sat by and watched helplessly as Nick slept off the last effects of whatever had temporarily restored his physical condition to human. His pulse grew weaker until she could no longer find it at all; his body temperature grew cold; the color left his cheeks until he was pale as ever. When he finally woke, his eyes opened to briefly reveal bright yellow orbs that returned immediately to blue as Nick fought down the beast inside. She made no move to stop him as he moved wordlessly towards the kitchen and consumed the only thing that could sate his hunger.

When he had finished off the bottle, he returned to the living room, though he carefully avoided looking at her, and said nothing. Instead, he sat down to sulk, contemplating some spot on the floor.

"Look," she said when silence had gone on long enough. "We're a lot closer now than we were a week ago, right? If we can get as close as we have, it's only a matter of time before we get it right."

Finally looking up at her, and trying to shake his depression, he thought out loud: "It had to be those pills you gave me that did it."

Agreeing, Natalie added, "I checked the bottle... you grabbed the wrong one. What you took was an antibiotic that Grace must have left on the desk. She's been taking it for an infection she picked up last week... So, if it was that drug that brought you back across, suppose you try it again?"

"Try again?" he asked, incredulous. "It nearly killed me the first time, and we ended up right back where we started! What could you hope to accomplish by trying again?"

"It didn't kill you, did it? You took two pills last time, right?" She barely acknowledged his nod of agreement before continuing "So, this time you only take one... "

Nick only stared at her. She certainly was persistent. Well, so was he. All the more so, now that he knew it was possible. But what price was he willing to pay for humanity? Was it worth living out the rest of a brief mortal lifetime if he was constantly as sick and debilitated as he had been for the last several days? If he kept taking the drugs, would his body eventually adjust, and how long might that take? Pondering all these questions, Nick had missed whatever Natalie had just finished saying.

"Those pills will still be there next time I take some vacation time, right? I think I've missed enough work this week. I'm afraid of what Schanke has been doing in my absence." Nick got up and put his jacket on.

Natalie stood and put her coat on to follow him out. Obviously, Nick wasn't ready to return to the human race. She could understand his hesitation, his fear. She could wait, for awhile at least. At least now the decision was his. No more would he be able to blame his condition on fate, or on anyone but himself. Natalie was confident that one day he would be ready. And now she knew that when he was ready, she would be able to help him. For the time being, that in itself was a victory.

--The End--

Celebration
by Margaret Newman

The secretary quietly pulled the doors closed on her boss's private office. The last she saw of him, he was standing with his back to her, staring out at the city wrapped in night. The lights from other buildings blinked like stars. She sighed, and turned. The other woman that worked in the office with her glanced up.

"Everything okay, Molly?" Beatrix, the executive secretary, arched a finely drawn eyebrow.

"He asked for a bottle of wine." Molly walked over to her desk, and logged off her computer. "He wants me to go to that gourmet shop down the street, and get him their most expensive. I shouldn't be gone long."

"A bottle of wine?" Beatrix frowned, her fingers pausing over her keyboard. "Well, as they say, 'ours is not to reason why'. I've never seen him eat or drink a single thing. My husband was complaining about our hours again, but as long as I'm getting paid this wage, I don't care."

"That's for certain." Molly half smiled. Fred, Beatrix's husband, always complained about something. His wife's work hours was just one of millions. As for the wage, it had enabled her to pay off quite a few bills. She now could see the day when she could own a car, her own car, brand new. Someday she would have an apartment to herself without the need for a roommate. She pulled on her coat– brand new– and buttoned up. "I'll finish the Headon report when I get back. He wanted that by morning."

"Good." Beatrix nodded. "I'll have this analysis typed up in no time, and I can get started on those letters we didn't finish last night."

Molly walked to the elevator, her heels clicking loudly in the quiet hall. She said hello to the fern that sat in the heavy black metal pot under the elevator buttons. She raised her eyes and considered the bronze plaque that named the business she worked for and its owner. Her distorted image reflected blurrily in it. He was unlike any man she had ever met. Not that she was particularly well traveled. She knew, though, that he was different.

The elevator "bing" almost made her jump. The doors opened, silently waiting for her. She stepped in. Pressed the ground floor button, the doors shut, and she sighed. As the elevator took her down, she walked around in circles --never able to simple stand still in one, especially by herself. He was the easiest boss she had ever worked for. He might have his peculiarities, but once you accepted them, and did your work as he said, when he said, everything went smoothly.

It was his white blonde hair, cut so short, and those eyes that unnerved her. She looked up as the elevator stopped. Ground floor. She walked out the lobby and into the night wondering if he was watching her from his office window.

* * *

"What's up, Janette?" Nick frowned, glancing quickly over the dance floor of The Raven. He had just wrapped up a triple homicide, and was supposed to meet Schanke back at the precinct when he got Janette's call.

"'What's up, Janette'?" She raised a finely arched eyebrow at him. A bottle sat on her table, and two fluted goblets –empty– sat waiting. "I have not seen you in over two weeks, and that is how you greet me, Nicolah?"

"I don't have time for games." He growled, and half turned to leave. What stayed him, he did not know. Something in her eyes? Something about the turn of her lips?

"Indulge me, mon cher." She whispered huskily. It was not her sultry, sensuous whisper. It was her 'you're on my shit list' whisper.

Nick stepped closer to the table, leaning an elbow on it, he cupped his chin in his hand. He waited patiently for her to calm down, forcing himself to get a grip as well.

"I called you for a reason." She set the long cigarette holder aside. "Tell me, Nicolah, what is today's date?"

"Today is November 19, 1993." He replied, straightening. "Why?"

"Where were we November 19, 1393?" She watched his face, and then as realization dawned on him, their eyes locked.

"Avignon." He croaked. "We celebrated LaCroix's birthday by giving him that maid that had denounced him as a demon."

"That's right, mon cher." She opened the bottle--Janette's private brand--and poured a share into each fluted glass. "I thought we should mark the day somehow."

Nick accepted the drink from her, looking down into the dark, ruby depths of the fluid. He could smell the blood, human blood, and a touch of wine. He could hear the maid's screams and LaCroix's laughter. They had celebrated *his* birthday only a few times, always on November 19, though Nick did not know why, it had nothing to do with LaCroix's real birth date, and the last time he had left LaCroix's company had been on this date. Janette held up her glass. He slowly touched his to hers.

"To LaCroix." Janette said with a sort of sad smile around her lips. He could not read her eyes, they were hooded. Did she truly miss him? They had known each other longer than she had known Nick.

"Happy Birthday." His lips twisted in a smile. Perhaps that maid had the last laugh after all? They downed the drink in unison, setting their glasses on the table together. She leaned forward, and kissed him full on the mouth.

* * *

"Sir?" Molly knocked on the door as she opened it. Beatrix was in the copy room arguing with the fax machine. "I have the wine you requested."

"Come in, my dear." He smiled at her from behind his desk. "What were you able to find?"

"I can't say it, sir. It's French. The gentleman at the shop said it was the best he had, and they don't get it very often." She walked across the plush carpet to hand him the very expensive bottle. He took the bottle from her, their fingers touching momentarily. She stood while he examined the bottle.

"Very good." He chuckled. He read the label with ease, his French sounding strong and fluid. "Very good." He looked up at her, their eyes meeting, and he smiled slowly. A shivery feeling wiggled up her spine. It seemed as if he could read her mind, it was unnerving. "Have Beatrix join us."

"Yes, sir." She whispered, turned to walk back across the carpet. It was hard walking on this plush stuff in heels.

"Molly." He said her name just as she got to the double doors. She looked back. He had obviously watched her trek to the doors.

"Yes, sir?" She felt herself flushing, but she ignored it.

"Bring in three glasses as well." He saw her flush, his smile deepened. The fingers of his right hand toyed with a turquoise and gold pen. "It's my birthday, and I feel like celebrating."

--The End--

A Lamentation, for Strings

by Susan M. Garrett

Chapter One

As was her habit, Janette ran her finger lightly along the black velvet choker that circled her neck. She could keep an eye on most of the interior of the Raven from her vantage point, yet still managed to remain in shadow, invisible to mortal eyes.

Immortal eyes were another matter entirely. They knew she was there and that she was watching for any infraction of the rules she'd set in place to guard her interests and the lives of the mortals that frequented the club. What they did beyond the doors of the Raven was not her concern, but inside the Raven the appearance of propriety, however false, was everything.

It was as her hand dropped down to neckline of her dress, where a small ruby heart was her only concession to the holiday, that Alma came out of the back room. Janette winced at the garish red satin and white lace of the low-cut and high-hemmed dress. The blonde vampire had chosen to accent the outfit with black net stockings and red spiked high-heels.

Shaking her head, Janette cleared her throat. "Planning to make a little money this evening, are we?"

"Just because you don't get into the holiday doesn't mean we all have to put our love lives on hold." Still preening, Alma leaned against the bar. She held up a hand to the bartender, indicating that she wanted a drink, then arranged herself, letting her assets show to their best advantage.

Janette quickly reached over and rearranged the lace at the plunging neckline of Alma's dress. When Alma frowned and made a motion to remove the lace, Janette slapped her hand lightly. "Rules of the house–I don't want you getting picked up for indecent exposure."

Alma smiled sweetly at the bartender as he returned with her glass, taking it delicately between two fingers. "That's the reason I'm usually picked up."

"Yes, but not by the police. Although I could ask Nicola to make certain you get a cell with an easterly view ... "

If anything, Alma's pale skin turned a shade whiter and she sipped at her drink. Then, she smiled. "Ah, but he *wouldn't*, not even for you. And for me...?" With a flip of her wrist, she sent the lace cascading back down the front of the dress.

Leaning her elbow on the bar, Janette rested her forehead on her hand. "Have a care, Alma. He might take you up on that–Nicola has his weaknesses when it comes to a pretty face and ... other things. Though, I think he's too busy playing with mortals to pay much attention to you."

"I agree with him. Mortals are so much fun to play with."

Janette reached for her drink and studied Alma carefully. After a few sips, she leaned back against the bar, her elbows on the counter. "He's been at it longer than you and even *he* makes mistakes. If

you have any regard for your own safety, and ours, you'd do well to avoid *playing* with mortals." She raised an eyebrow. "Didn't you learn anything from the one who brought you across?"

"There wasn't a lot of time." Alma sniffed, her gaze locked in the distance. "He walked out into the sunlight one morning. No note. Nothing. The night before we had an awful lot of fun. And the next evening, he was gone."

"Understandable." When Alma shot her a fierce glance, Janette took a sip from her glass of blood and wine, letting the salt taste linger on her tongue, trying to fight back her smile. "Still, there's a lot about mortals you shouldn't take for granted *cherie*. Even LaCroix tended to underestimate them, now and again."

"Oh, please!" Alma placed her glass on the bar and hopped up onto the bar stool beside Janette. "Don't tell me about the 'good old days'. It wasn't like you had to be careful about mortals back then."

"They weren't 'good,' just ... different. And we *did* have to be careful about where we fed and when. Not so much in the beginning--" Janette couldn't help but smile, at the memories of careless kills, warm blood, and joyous abandon. Then she focused her gaze on Alma, frowning. "But times changed. They always do. And it became harder to find amusements. LaCroix, however, was always *very* good at finding ways to occupy his time ... and mine."

Chapter Two

It was as Janette swung her arm up to grab hold of the carriage roof that she heard a muffled exclamation from behind her. Hurrying inside, she arranged the heavy green- beaded gown as quickly as possible and seated herself, keeping her expression even, despite an innate desire to giggle. LaCroix's moods had been mercurial for the past few weeks and she didn't want to set him off.

His hand to his cheek, LaCroix stood outside the doorway of the open carriage and peered inside, his overcoat dusted lightly with snow. "Perhaps you and that brutal dress should go on to the casino alone? I'd no idea you'd added potentially dangerous fashion to your fatal charms."

"It *is* the fashion," protested Janette, trying to arrange her skirts to allow him more room. Unfortunately, the dress had enough weight and body to make up its own mind.

Shaking his head, LaCroix entered the coach, then closed the door and tapped on the ceiling near the driver's box with the handle of his cane. "Why not just send the dress ahead. I'm certain it could stand on its own."

"Ah, but could it play *bingo*?"

LaCroix winced, his hand dropping to his left coat pocket, where she knew he kept his wallet. "And how much will this new diversion cost?"

"You should ask how much I'll win. It's derived from *tumbula*, after all. I played constantly in Milan."

"You *lost* constantly in Milan."

Janette turned her attention to the curtained window and pouted. "But that was a over a hundred years ago."

"I'd be certain to mention that to your backers."

The snow was falling lightly outside the panes of glass in the carriage window, coating the detritus of the streets of Paris. Even in the darkness, the city seemed alight and alive and the snow gave the streets and alleys an eerie glow. Touching a finger to her lips, she wondered what argument might cause LaCroix to part with his money--so much of her own ready cash had been wasted this last week in learning the game. "Perhaps we can make a trade?"

"And what of yours, pretty Janette, do I not already own?"

The barb was soft and meant to sting, but Janette still smiled sweetly. "I know where Nicola is."

When she turned her gaze to him, LaCroix was also smiling. He reached forward and lifted her hand, kissing the back of it gently. "You *have* learned well." Then, very carefully, he released her hand and leaned back in the only corner of the carriage where her dress seemed not to have claimed space, a self-satisfied smile on his lips. "And how furious you'll be when I tell you that at this moment, the information is worthless to me."

Unable to hide her disappointment or confusion, she pulled her hand back, holding it to her chest. "You *know*?"

"No. Oh, it would be easy enough to discover--our Nicholas leaves a trail behind him that a blind man could follow in a blizzard--but I have other matters on my mind. So you'll have to come up with your gambling money in another way. Or find something else to tempt me."

The carriage lurched, the springs sticking in the cold, then came to a stop. Janette glanced out the window, but there were no glittering lights, beautiful carriages, sumptuous gowns, or handsome young men. Instead, the street was small and dark, the houses of a class below that of the wealthy Parisians who could afford the diversion of losing a potential fortune in an evening. She looked at LaCroix expectantly. "This is *not* the casino."

"I have a stop to make first." When she opened her mouth to complain, a steel door closed behind his eyes. "Humor me."

Janette closed her mouth immediately and began the task of gathering together her dress, as LaCroix grabbed his top hat and cane and exited the carriage. He closed the door behind him and she heard his muffled conversation with the driver. By the time she was ready to exit, he'd opened the door again, and extended the small step.

Taking her hand, he helped her from the carriage. "And what part am I to play in this conquest?" she asked, glancing with disdain at the soot-darkened exterior of the tenement building.

"My sister." When she glanced back at him and coquettishly batted her eyelashes, he laughed, his hand still holding hers as he led her up the steps of the building. "You're right ... a cousin, perhaps?"

"A *distant* cousin," said Janette. Nothing in his look or demeanor gave him away. The fact that this new *amorosa* would come from such humble surroundings surprised her--LaCroix took his pleasure where he would, it was true, and they all did the same--but there was usually money involved somewhere along the line. And from the look of this place, he'd find little enough money here. A woman would have had to be extraordinary to have gained his attention from such a hovel. And by playing against the woman's affections, she might annoy LaCroix enough to entice his wallet from him before he sent her off to the casino, alone.

That was her plan, even as they walked into the dim hallway. But LaCroix turned to her and placed a hand on her arm, saying sternly. "Follow my lead, as always, but do nothing to disrupt this."

The steel was still in his eyes. Janette offered a wan smile, following him up the rickety stairs, her dress banging against the wallboard as she climbed the steps, rapidly rearranging her plans to suit his mood.

They stopped at a door on the third floor, which would have been an inexpensive room, but not the cheapest in the building. LaCroix knocked lightly, the head of his cane tapping against the wooden door, and Janette pursed her lips in distaste at the peeling paint and wallpaper and the dim gas jets. Why mortals chose to spend their short lives in such squalor always eluded her.

Her annoyance turned to surprise when she glanced at LaCroix. For a second, there was an expression on his face and in his eyes that she couldn't place. Over the centuries, she thought she'd seen all of his moods, even those he'd pretended not to have, but now there was a hesitation in him that she'd never seen before. For some reason, it alarmed her.

Janette contemplated touching his hand and getting his attention, cajoling him to go with her to the casino, or back to their rooms. In other times, in other places, she'd found ways to divert his attention. But the memory of his touch on her arm and his stern warning came back to her and she took a step back. Whatever it was that LaCroix wished to do, he *would* do and to interfere would only put her in jeopardy.

LaCroix's lips twisted into a frown after a moment. He raised the cane as if to knock at the door again, but then it opened. An old man stood in the doorway, stooped over, with gray-white hair and a white mustache and beard. Janette almost felt she could tell his age by counting the lines on his face.

As soon as he saw them, he opened the door wider, backing away into the room, the gesture subservient. At that, some of the confidence seemed restored to LaCroix and he stalked into the room as if he owned it. Janette followed at his heels, not bothering to hide her smile, as the old man closed the door behind them. Less than a hundred years before, the commoners had risen against their wealthy masters, yet it had circled around again--LaCroix's lessons about the power of gold had never been wasted on her.

The room was drab--old hangings by the window barely blocked out the gray-black night sky that signaled more snow to come. The chill was offset only by the faint light of the dirty gas jets and the dying embers of a coal fire in an old stove. The floor seemed to have been swept, of which she was glad, as her expensive dress trailed after her, but the furniture had seen better days. It was then that she noticed the second mortal in the room--a young girl, perhaps no older than eight or nine years, with the plumpness of childhood in her features. Her skin was pale, her facing having the wan, pinched look of a mortal who had eaten some, but not enough to fill the belly. Her hair was the color of garden dirt, a black brown that was common enough. But there was an innocence in her eyes. And fear.

Janette smiled at the sight, the fear stirring a hunger in her. Gliding over to the girl, which no mortal woman could have accomplished in that dress, she tilted the child's chin with her fingers, exposing the surprisingly clean throat beneath the well-worn winter dress. "Such a pretty thing," she lied. Then she looked to LaCroix. "Is she a gift, a surprise for me?"

He moved more slowly than was his norm, his eyes meeting hers as he took her hand from the girl, then turned toward the old man. "Monsieur Veneuil, my cousin, Janette. You will not mind, I thought it best to have a chaperone this meeting."

"Well-considered Monsieur. I have faith in your continued observation of matters of propriety." He sketched a bow. "You are welcome, Mademoiselle."

The old man spoke softly, his voice low, but even. LaCroix turned to her, pointing toward an old settee. "If you will wait there, it shall not take long." In a quieter whisper, between the two of them, he added, "If she does not meet my needs, you may have her. If there is promise-- I'll give you a quarter of her weight in chips, at the casino."

Promise of what, Janette neither asked nor cared. Nodding and smiling, she took her seat demurely, pretending to arrange her dress. But all the while, her eyes watched him, wondering what could interest him in such a drab, mortal cub.

The old man cleared his throat and held his hands wide. "If I may get you some refreshment, Monsieur LaCroix, and for the Mademoiselle, I have some *madere* that might be to your taste--"

"We shall dine later," said LaCroix, dismissing the idea with a wave. He walked toward the child, then around her, as if studying her. "And this is what was found for me?"

There was no disappointment in his tone, or admiration. He sounded very much like a man inspecting livestock and was less enthusiastic than the *couturier* and the other woman at a salon showing, where Janette had her gowns fashioned. The child curtseyed to them both, her movements awkward and untutored. Janette stifled a giggle, not wishing to earn LaCroix's reprimand.

The old man only nodded. "We were told of your requirements, Monsieur. She is Marguerite ... my granddaughter."

LaCroix raised an eyebrow as he regarded the man. "Then you would know--is she sound of wind? In good health? Undernourished, certainly ... "

"My son is a young lawyer, beginning his practice. The child lives with me. To say there is money to care for her sufficiently would be a lie." The old man shrugged, then walked to the girl, placing his hand on her shoulder. "But she has great promise, Monsieur. Were she not my own blood, I would say the same."

LaCroix stared down at the child. "Your hands," he demanded.

The girl stared up at LaCroix in fear and didn't move. It was not until the old man squeezed her shoulder that she held her hands out stiffly before her. LaCroix took her left hand in his own, turning it over, then did the same with the right. He trailed his nail across the side of her finger, then released her, stepping away. "Good. She's developed the proper calluses. I will hear her play, of course."

"Of course." The old man walked to a cupboard, which he opened, and withdrew a small violin case.

Janette leaned forward, suddenly beginning to understand. Music was the only thing from the mortal world that interested LaCroix, other than their blood and their terror.

LaCroix walked to the case and opened it while it still sat in the old man's hands. Taking the violin from within, he smiled in admiration, running his hands along the smooth soundboard, the polished wood glowing even in the dim light. "Where did you get this?"

"I made it, Monsieur, a long time ago. For my son." When LaCroix looked up at him, he cleared his throat again. "It seems that those in law have little talent for music. But my granddaughter has spent many hours with it. It is sized to her. And, in another two years, she will move to a proper violin."

"Acceptable," commented LaCroix. He handed the instrument back to the old man, who passed it into the hands of the girl. Her fingers wrapped around the bridge of the violin knowingly, plump as they were with childhood. She held the violin at rest, eyes darting from LaCroix, then to her grandfather.

Stepping back, LaCroix gestured toward the old man. "What does she play?"

"What do you wish to hear, Monsieur?" The old man smiled, then nodded toward the child. "Mozart—the Violin Concerto in G—allegro?"

The child carefully raised the bow. Janette steeled herself, prepared to hear the screech of a poorly drawn bow—a sound with which LaCroix would torment her when she deigned to resort to delicate needlework every now and again. But the child knew something of the art. There was no perfection in the work, but to Janette's ear it was dazzling, especially from such young fingers.

The child was no more than five minutes into the piece, when LaCroix called, "Stop!" raising his hand.

Janette started and stared at him, suddenly realizing that her attention had been drawn to the child—LaCroix had seemed to melt into the shadows the moment the music started. She pursed her lips in annoyance, making a mental note to concentrate on him when the child played again.

The girl ceased at LaCroix's command, the bow rising from the strings, frozen in mid-air. She looked at her grandfather with terrified eyes as LaCroix reached into his jacket. His withdrew a sheaf of papers, which he carefully unfolded. "Have her play this." He handed the paper to Veneuil.

The old man took the papers gently, glancing over them. "Monsieur, I do not recognize this work—"

"It's in my own hand."

"But Monsieur —"

"Have her play it," insisted LaCroix, pointing to the child.

"But she does not read music yet."

Releasing an exasperated sigh, LaCroix turned. His impatience showed in his movements, as he hurriedly snatched the papers from the old man and turned toward Janette. She sat up straight, hoping that he was annoyed enough to call the matter quit and give her the child as he'd promised.

But he held up his hand to her, gesturing for her to stay in place. As she sank back against the threadbare cushions, she pouted, watching him approach the old man.

"Do you have another violin?"

Veneuil paused a moment, licking his lips. "Yes, I do, Monsieur. My own." Again, the old man returned to the cabinet. The case he withdrew was battered and worn by time and handling -- Janette winced at the sight, but something inside her sang triumphantly. LaCroix would be furious to find an instrument in such disrepair. And no matter what he had promised her, she knew she'd have to move quickly, to take the child's blood before he took the pleasure for himself.

But when LaCroix opened the box, the violin was as gleaming and as well cared for as the one the child held. He held the instrument beneath his chin and tested the bow across the strings. It sang, clear and cold. Nodding to himself, he then fixed his eyes on the child, addressing her for the third time. "Listen."

Janette had heard the piece before. Whether he'd written it or had learned it in his centuries of travel, she cared not. Always, it was the same -- only the quality of the tone varied, dependent on the instrument he used. There was a fever in him when he played, which he often did when he was lost

in thought, planning some new escapade or amusement or revenge. It was in Milan, in fact, that she remembered him playing this so clearly, standing on the balcony in the moonlight, contemplating the fates of those mortals who had cheated them. By midnight he had finished playing. By dawn, the mortal bodies were scattered in pieces across the market place.

It was that she remembered as he played. And, when he ceased, she could not keep herself from applauding, as much for the memory of that night of blood and sudden anger spent, as for the music. LaCroix looked back at her, smiling, and bowed. Then he turned toward the child again. "Play."

Janette dropped her hands to her lap and whet her lips, already imaging how sweet the child's blood would be. Surely now she would disappoint LaCroix. Who could play such a piece, after only one hearing?

Again, the child hesitated, looking to her grandfather. Then, meeting LaCroix's eyes, she drew the bow across the strings.

If at first she was nervous, after four bars the violin sang strong. Again, the notes were not perfect -- there were differences in her performance and LaCroix's, and Janette put that down to her having heard the piece only once. But her performance was close enough that someone who had not spent an evening in Milan, smashing flowerpots while listening to that tune repeated endlessly for hours, would not have noticed too much of a difference.

Then, she realized that there was something subtly different, other than inexperience with the piece. The child's bow produced some quality of sound that LaCroix had never drawn from any instrument. In wonder, Janette sat straight, watching the child's fingers, the lids of her eyes closed tight with concentration as she swept the bow blindly across the strings, her fingers moving down the fingerboard and gripping the strings properly by touch alone. Was this what LaCroix was looking for?

He had turned to face the shadows, so she could not see his expression. His eyes were closed, but there was a sparkle of green gold from beneath a half-raised lash. The fingers of his left hand traced her movements along the fingerboard of the violin he held to his chin, his bow echoing only in motion -- it never touched the strings. When she was done, LaCroix, lowered the bow and dropped the violin into his hand. Then he turned and Janette saw a sharp smile on his lips. "Again," he commanded, in a quiet voice that held a core of steel.

The child's eyes were wide as she raised the bow and the music again began to flow from the violin. This time Janette watched LaCroix, but he handed the instrument back to the old man and leaned against the wall, his hands clasped together. This time, his eyes were open, but they focused only on the tiny violin and the hands that made the music.

Feeling neglected, Janette felt moved to do something to gain his attention, but an instinct for survival reminded her of that hand upon her arm earlier. She stayed where she was and listened, again surprised that this rendition was different from the last, with a fullness of sound and tone the previous rendition had lacked. And thus the third and fourth time he commanded her to play the piece, it changed again and again, growing, like some musical flower, adapting and shifting in tone and presence.

The fifth time that LaCroix said, "Again," the old man stepped forward. "Monsieur, she is only a *child*. Please!"

LaCroix stiffened, towering over the old man. He raised his fist, as if to strike the intruder and Janette rose from her seat, smelling blood in the air and growing hungry.

"Monsieur, please!" said the child's small voice. She dropped the bow to the ground and ran to LaCroix, her fingers grasping at his coat. "Don't hurt him! I will play for you. I will!"

Janette walked toward them, then saw why she had smelled the blood – one of the child's fingers were bleeding. Her hand had left a stain on LaCroix's coat and there was a small, bloody thumbprint on the white shirt beneath. She drew in her breath in a low hiss, not knowing what would happen.

LaCroix took the child's hand from his coat and held it in his own. His gaze fell on Veneuil. "She will be taught to read music," he commanded. "Get her a proper instructor. I'll give you a stipend for her instruction and living expenses. The child must have a proper diet, and warmth enough to live. And I -- and my cousin --shall come once a month to hear her play. At that time, I'll deliver the music she'll play for us the following month."

The old man's gaze wavered. His hand went down to the child's head, stroking that muddy colored hair. He knew he was making a deal with the devil. And yet Janette knew he would regret his actions later. Mortals always did.

"Agreed," said Veneuil, after a moment's time. "But I have conditions as well. Marguerite will play until she wishes to play and no longer. She will not be struck or bullied. And you will have no claim on her, beyond her music."

LaCroix laughed low in his throat. "I promise you, Monsieur Veneuil, I wish to make her a violinist, not a whore -- a whore would be cheaper. As long as she will play for me, when I command, I don't care what she does." He put his hand inside his jacket and withdrew his wallet. Janette's eyes were almost as wide as the child's as she saw LaCroix hand over a stack of currency, her gambling stake rapidly dwindling. She came just short at hissing angrily at all of them.

But LaCroix sensed her mood. And the look he flashed her promised untold torment if she acted upon her desire. Chilled by the gaze, she dropped her eyes demurely, muttering her farewell and following in LaCroix's trail quietly.

Once on the stairs, he smiled over his shoulder at her. "Don't look so glum, Janette – my credit's good at the casino. And you shall have your money to lose, this once."

She stared at him. "Whatever possessed you to give him all that money? He'll drink it away, or squander it on heat and food -- they always do. Having traffic with mortals, even ones who play music --"

He stopped on the steps and turned sideways, so that she couldn't move. "You heard her play and *still* you ask?" Making a tsking sound with his tongue against his teeth, he turned away. "Consider it another of my investments. There's blood aplenty in this city, but few adults who can play as well as she will in a decade. They'll applaud for her talents across Europe. Crowned heads will command her to play and will reward her handsomely. But she'll belong to *me*. As will her music. As will her money."

"But it's the music you want."

They reached the bottom of the staircase. LaCroix took her hand as he led her through the squalid hall, to the door. "You are so certain...would you like to wager your game winnings on the outcome?"

Janette met his gaze squarely, though suspiciously. "And the terms?"

"That if she becomes what I will make her -- first violinist of the *orchestre de Paris*, or something comparable -- within a decade, you'll give me your winnings. And if she does not...you may have her."

Frowning, Janette looked away. "Ah, no. I know you too well, LaCroix. You'll become angry with her and take her yourself. And I shall *still* lose."

"All right. I'll double your winnings." He stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. "*And* you may have her. Or I'll find another to take her place."

Relenting, she nodded. "All right. But the replacement must be a musician of comparable talent. There's a sweetness in their blood that I find...delightful."

"Agreed." LaCroix held the door for her, bowing again. "The gaming tables await, Mademoiselle."

Accepting his chivalrous behavior with a slight curtsey, Janette decided that the night would be more enjoyable than she'd initially anticipated. With LaCroix in a good mood, she felt lucky. How could she possibly lose at bingo?

But there was something in the way he kept raising his hand to his lips that intrigued her. And it wasn't until they'd entered the carriage that she'd remembered the child's hand, grasped in his own, had been bleeding.

LaCroix had been licking the blood off his fingers.

Chapter Three

Janette stared at the glass of blood in her hand and took a large swallow. Talking made her thirsty.

"You played *bingo*?"

Alma's giggle got under her skin. Raising her glass, she signaled the bartender for another, but refused to look at Alma. "Everything old was once new," she said sharply.

"Well, I suppose that's true about everything. Even you."

"Don't you have somewhere to go?"

"I do. But he'll be late. He's only mortal, after all. And if he's going to be late, I shouldn't be waiting for him."

Sighing, Janette took the filled glass from the bartender. "At least you've learned *something*."

"So?" Alma leaned closer.

"What?"

"Did you win?"

Janette smiled, her finger tracing the line of her choker. "Yes. I did, quite handsomely. In fact, there might have been a problem about collecting my winnings, had LaCroix not been there. And there was the most *adorable* croupier..." Janette took another drink and rested the smooth glass against her cheek, reveling in memory.

"Not bingo. The bet with LaCroix," pressed Alma.

Janette looked at her from beneath lowered lids. "You *do* realize that if you lean any further, that dress is going to give?"

"That's the point, isn't it?"

Sighing again, Janette turned her eyes to the dance floor of the club. LaCroix would have liked the place -- sound and fury signifying nothing. Although he would have had a back room sound-proofed, for his own amusements.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"I thought you didn't like to hear about the 'good old days,'" countered Janette. "And that you were perfectly happy playing with mortals."

"I'm going to tell everyone you used to play bingo."

Biting back the inclination to reach over and yank out a handful of that carefully coiffured gold, Janette glared at her. "All right. If you must know. I survived those monthly recitals fairly well --even Nicola attended a few, after he realized LaCroix was usually in a better mood afterwards and left him to his own devices. Of course, we didn't spend *all* of our time in Paris, after that first year. And once, when we returned from Dublin, oh, it must have been eight years later, LaCroix found a note awaiting him -- a summons from the child's parents."

Chapter Four

"I suppose I must be on my best behavior," noted Janette, arranging her dress in the carriage.

"Which still leaves something lacking," LaCroix answered absently.

It was late spring and the roads of Paris were awash with water, the drains over-running their courses due to the rain. The carriage jolted and creaked through the ruts in the stone streets, water splashing up through the crack of the door and onto the hem of her dress. The blouse was white and the skirt black, with a green ribbon at her neck -- very fetching, LaCroix had told her, but hardly her idea of evening wear. With her hair up and the tiniest of emeralds at her ears, she looked like a wealthy spinster. And even LaCroix had forgone his usually dapper image, settling for an evening business suit. He looked like a bank clerk. And if he were in a better mood, she would have said as much to his face.

But he was not in a good mood. "At least you were able to decline their dinner invitation. Pretending to chew that horrid food. It probably would have been chicken." She shuddered at the thought.

"Hmnnn."

Receiving no further answer, she sank back against the carriage seat, bored. She'd been flattered at first, when LaCroix had requested, then demanded her presence at this meeting. She was to be part of the 'veneer of respectability' the family would require. Without the presence of the old man, who had passed away in their absence from Paris, it seemed LaCroix's plans for Marguerite Veneuil would be thwarted by her ever-so-proper parents.

Janette smiled and touched her hand to the flat, stiff-brimmed hat, remembering the hovel in which the grandfather and child had been living eight years ago. The family were trying to live down their

humble origins. And now that the young lawyer had a well-established practice and a reputation in the community, the family believed they'd be able to dismiss the semi-mysterious patron of the arts, who continued to pay for the education and upkeep of their daughter.

Her smile grew wider as the carriage pulled up to a respectable, middle class house in a row of similar houses, in a neighborhood that had been fashionable perhaps a decade or two before. They were certainly making an effort. She almost hoped there would be a misstep tonight. According to her agreement with LaCroix, Marguerite would be hers – although she had grown fond of the girl, now that she was no longer a child. In fact, she'd prepared a small speech about possibly bringing the girl across, if he was in a good enough mood. The thought of having a younger sister, to dress and teach the ways of night life, intrigued her.

But the coach had stopped. LaCroix still seemed absent, offering her his hand as she stepped down from the coach, then his arm, as they strode on to the sidewalk and up the steps to the house. There was no cane tonight – he tapped the door with his knuckles, then turned to look over the electric lights that blazed along the street. "It's changing so fast," he said softly. "One miracle after another."

"I've heard the plans for the Exposition are proceeding well. There's some sort of tower they plan to build, from which you'll be able to see all the lights of Paris."

Her words earned her a sharp smile. "You've learned your part well." LaCroix touched his finger to her lips. "And if you learn not to speak until spoken to, so much the better."

The door opened and a gentleman appeared. "Yes, Monsieur, Mademoiselle?"

"Monsieur LaCroix and his cousin," announced LaCroix. "We are here at the invitation of Monsieur and Madame Veneuil. I believe we're expected?"

The man opened the door, bowing slightly. "Monsieur and Madame Veneuil await your presence in the drawing room. If I may take your hat, sir? And yours, Mademoiselle?"

Janette doffed her hat readily enough, as well as the light, short cape she'd been wearing. "I wouldn't mind not getting the hat back if we have to leave quickly," she told LaCroix. "It makes me look like a schoolgirl."

"I've been told mortal men fancy that sort of thing. Or that–" he smiled and gestured toward one of the upstairs maids, who was leaning over the second level to stare down at them. Discovered, she quickly disappeared from view, although their hearing was sensitive enough to hear her giggles.

"Charming," answered Janette, pasting a smile on her face. "Perhaps we *should* have accepted the invitation to dine."

The gentleman passed them, his mortal ears not sensitive enough to pick up their conversation. "I shall announce you," he instructed. "If you will follow me?"

Her voice still low, Janette took LaCroix's arm again and asked, "Not that I wish to complain, but why has your mood improved?"

"Pretense, pretension – they're idiots." Beneath his civil countenance, she saw the lurking smile of a shark. "I thought the blood-line from the grandfather had run true, having dealt with Marguerite. I see it skipped a generation. Which is all the better for us."

Two wide doors opened into a drawing room that contained items of great delicacy, but little eye for style or true fashion was evident. Janette smiled prettily as she was announced, noting immediately

that Madame Veneuil's gown was at least two years out of date, while her own dress presaged the trend of the coming fashion.

Veneuil had been standing at the fireplace when they entered. He walked forward as the gentleman announced them, standing before LaCroix. "Monsieur LaCroix. My father has told me something about you. As has my daughter. It's a shame we haven't met before this."

"Indeed." LaCroix sketched a light bow, ignoring Veneuil's outstretched hand, then bowed to Madame Veneuil, reaching forward to lift her hand to his lips and kiss it. "And such a pleasure to meet your charming wife. Madame."

Janette marveled at his smooth elegance, holding the woman's hand a second longer than he should, yet turning in such a way that the husband couldn't see the slight impropriety. Madame Veneuil's smile went from false to genuine in a matter of seconds. Then LaCroix reached for Janette's hand, pulling her forward, into their view. "May I present my cousin, Mademoiselle Janette. She has graciously chaperoned my visits with your daughter."

Janette assumed the role she'd been dressed for, accepting Veneuil's hand with a shy delicacy, assuming a more confident note with the man's wife — LaCroix would have no complaint in her behavior. She'd charm them both.

Then LaCroix turned serious, as Veneuil gestured him to a chair. He seated himself and leaned forward. "My condolences on the passing of your father. He was a true artist."

Taken aback, Monsieur Veneuil nodded, his eyes meeting those of his wife. "Thank you, sir. In fact, it's my father's passing that brought your arrangement to light. Would you fancy a drink? I have an excellent sherry."

LaCroix locked gazes with the gentleman and declined the offered drink ever so slightly, then turned his regrets to Veneuil. "No, thank you. The night is still young. And my cousin does not drink... wine."

Janette ducked her head in a demure fashion, then looked up from beneath her lashes to see Madame Veneuil's approving glare. She wondered if the woman's blood would taste as thin and pasty as her personality.

Again, Veneuil seemed at a loss. Clasping his hands together, he rose from his chair. "Then, we should pass directly to matters, I suppose. As I said, I was not aware of the agreement between yourself and my grandfather with regard to my daughter's musical education —"

"An agreement between a patron of the arts," LaCroix rested his hand against his chest to indicate himself, leaning back in the overstuffed chair, "and a practitioner of the arts. There is no contract, Monsieur, nor any claim of my part upon your daughter, save that I wish to continue to fund her education and, should she allow it, see her well onto the road of a professional in the field."

Madame Veneuil cleared her throat, then glanced at her husband. "But you see, Monsieur LaCroix, that is our problem. We are a respectable family. For our daughter to become a common musician..."

LaCroix's eyes flashed. "There is nothing common about your daughter's talent or education, Madame. I can assure you of that." Before she could answer, he drew himself up in the chair and nodded, "But I understand your concern for her reputation. As I said, my cousin has been kind enough to chaperone any of the private recitals I have requested, to make certain that my money was being best applied to your daughter's interest."

"We appreciate that, Monsieur, and have no quarrel for the past. But now --" The man sighed. "She is nearly sixteen. She will be coming out into society this year or the next. She will need a dowry. And it is our intention that she marries well."

Janette allowed her smile to freeze in place, scenting blackmail on the wind, or extortion at the very least. These mortals may not have been as intelligent as LaCroix had expected, but they were greedy and cunning. And they were walking an extremely well-worn path down which she'd seen many tread, to their deaths.

But LaCroix had made no move. He merely shrugged and held out his hand, palm upward. "I am at a loss, Monsieur. What do you suggest?"

If Veneuil had been uneasy in suggesting that LaCroix jump at the chance to have his daughter's hand in marriage, he was more ill-at-ease now that LaCroix seemed not to have taken the hint. The man looked to his wife, then his hand moved to loosen the tie at his throat. Janette noticed what a particularly long neck he had, with such prominent veins.

But then LaCroix rose to his feet and smiled sadly. "Monsieur Veneuil, I am a patron of the arts. And I am a very wealthy man. I do not wish to have a wife, or a mistress– pardon my language, Madame–" he directed to Madame Veneuil. " As you have no doubt had my background investigated, you will know that I fund no one political faction – my investments are scattered to the winds. With the impending retirement of General Boulanger, the Third Republic is essentially intact, as is my fortune. I chose to spend a portion of my income on the arts. Some of that money may be used to raise your daughter among the greatest violinists of the world, perhaps of time. She will play before Kings and Presidents, shall travel the globe in luxury and adoration, and her talent will be admired long after she has passed from this earth. But if you wish, my cousin and I will leave here, never to return. You may find your daughter a suitable husband; marry her into respectability." He shrugged and turned to Janette, offering her his hand. "Come, cousin."

"No, Monsieur, please –" Veneuil placed a hand on LaCroix's shoulder, but withdrew it quickly, as LaCroix turned. "I meant no insult. We're concerned with our daughter's future. Surely you can forgive us our fears for her well-being?"

LaCroix's smile was almost gracious. Madame Veneuil had produced a handkerchief, with which she was rapidly patting her brow, occasionally directing angry glances toward her husband. Janette remained quiet and smiled inwardly, knowing that neither mortal had understood what their daughter's success could do to further their own financial and social aspirations. Where they had seen a potential wealthy suitor to be blackmailed into marriage, they now saw an image of a golden vista, with their daughter financing their great pilgrimage through pomp and circumstance.

"Most certainly, I can forgive your fears for your daughter," answered LaCroix, seating himself. "And can understand them. But if this thing is to be done, it should be Marguerite herself who makes the decision." He gestured toward Janette. "My cousin will fetch the girl -- they have grown to be great friends." Raising his hand to his lips, he whispered, "Do not hurry."

"Certainly, cousin," she answered, then paused and met Madame Veneuil's eyes for an instant. "If Madame does not mind --?"

"Madame doesn't mind," echoed the woman, dismissing her with a polite, but curt smile.

"That's because Madame thinks cousin Janette doesn't have any money," she whispered, beneath her breath. LaCroix looked up at the comment and she hurried from the room, his brief glare adding wings to her feet. Gathering her skirts, she scurried up the stairs, surprising the gentleman, who was

on his way down, and the upstairs maid, who was rearranging her bodice behind the curtain at the top of the stairs.

The maid let out a quick shriek at the sight of her, but Janette smiled and put a finger to her lips. "Not a word," she promised. "But I've been sent to fetch Marguerite."

Curtseying and mumbling, "Thank you, Miss. This way," the maid hurried down the hall, Janette following. At the end of the corridor, the maid put a key in the lock of the door, turning it.

Outraged, Janette turned on the maid, unable to keep her eyes from flashing. "How *dare* you lock her in!"

"Madame's orders!" The maid all but whimpered, then turned tail and ran.

Muttering beneath her breath in a language that hadn't been used in three hundred years, Janette opened the door to the bedroom. Marguerite was lying face down on the bed. She looked up as Janette entered. Her eyes were red and puffy and a trail of tears ran down the girl's face.

Instantly, Janette rushed to the bed and sat down, taking the girl in her arms. "It's all right *cherie*. I won't let them lock you in again. And I don't dare tell LaCroix – he'd kill them for such an outrage."

The girl's tears had started afresh as she'd thrown herself into Janette's arms. But at LaCroix's name, Marguerite had frozen in place, then pulled back. "He's *here*?" she squeaked.

"Of course. Your mother and father asked that we come, to discuss the arrangement with your grandfath--" Janette stopped speaking when she saw the panic in the girl's face. Smoothing back those muddy brown curls, now decorated with highlights of gold and styled in a manner that was out of fashion, she met the wide, brown eyes. "Ah, but you've been told of your mother's and father's plans, no?"

"Mother said that no one would marry me now, that Father would sue him for breach of contract or something." Marguerite put her hands over her eyes. "How can I face him? After what they've said!"

"It will take more than your parents to outmaneuver LaCroix," said Janette, still stroking the girl's hair. "Now, tell me, what gave your mother this idea?"

Marguerite peeked out from beneath her hands. "It was the earrings."

"The... earrings?" Janette frowned, then held out her hand. "Let me see them."

She expected the girl to reach beneath her hair. Instead, Marguerite slid solemnly from the bed and walked over to her wardrobe. Opening the door, she reached high on tiptoes, to the top shelf, and took down a tiny box.

Janette smiled to herself, seeing the care the girl took to hide her treasure. For though Marguerite could have passed as a woman, with the right clothing and makeup, she was still a child, protected from the world. Her grandfather had seen to that. But, with his passing, she had no more protection.

Except LaCroix. And herself.

Opening the tiny box, Marguerite hurried to the bed and placed it on Janette's palm. She recognized the earrings right away. They were hers, perhaps two hundred years old. Tiny rubies in an ordinary gold setting. She hadn't worn them in an age and had not thought of them for two decades. But here they were in her palm. LaCroix had given them to this child.

"Oh...my." Janette bit back her anger, knowing that it should be reserved for LaCroix. The child had done nothing, but play the violin and play it well.

"Yes." Marguerite nodded and seated herself on the bed. "He's sent flowers before. And music. And tickets to the symphony. But they always went to grandfather's house. After he died, they were directed here --"

"And your mother decided to take advantage of the situation." Janette almost closed her fist over the small earrings, but Marguerite was quick, rescuing her box and treasure. Reaching out, Janette patted her head. "Don't worry, little sister. LaCroix won't blame you."

The child smiled, then looked to the closed bedroom door. "But... what will happen?"

"You won't be forced to wed him." Janette smiled at the thought of LaCroix as the bridegroom of this little wren. "And he'll make certain that you'll continue with your studies, if that's what you wish to do."

"Oh." Marguerite looked down at the box in her hand, disappointment in her voice. "Is he married, then? I thought he might be. But Mother said such men sometimes takes mistresses --"

Immediately, she held the child's chin in her palm. "*Never* let him hear you say that," she scolded. "Or you'll never see him again." Janette didn't add that he'd probably kill her for making such a statement. Or laugh. One never quite knew with LaCroix.

But the child seemed oblivious to the danger, still staring at the earrings. "No, that mustn't happen. I couldn't live, then --"

A quiet cold stole into Janette's chest. Still holding the child's chin, she tilted her head and saw the sparkle of tears in her eyes. "Oh, my," she whispered, again. "Don't tell me that you love him. For that would be the greatest joke in the world."

"Why would it be so funny?" asked Marguerite, wrenching away from Janette and rising to her feet. She walked to the mirror, the earrings in her hands, then turned her head, holding them against her hair. "He's been kind to me, kinder than anyone, except Grandfather. And he's taught me so much. He taught me to love the music. And he's promised to make me the greatest violinist ever in the world."

Janette left the bed and walked over to Marguerite, avoiding the mirror. Draping herself against the door of the wardrobe, she smiled sadly. "But you *can't* love him, little sister. He's not of your kind. He doesn't love *you*, he loves your music. And loving him will only lead to your destruction."

"That's because I'm a child. In a year or two, I shall be grown. And *then* he will love me."

Her words had made no impact -- a schoolgirl's dreams filled the young eyes. After a moment, Janette sighed and took Marguerite's hand, drawing her into an embrace. "All right, little sister, dream on. But as I said, don't mention this to LaCroix... or to your parents. If you study hard and learn the music, I know he'll treat you well." Pulling back, she raised her hand to brush the muddy curls away from the tear-stained face. "And, for a time, you shall truly be my little sister. I will taking you shopping and teach you how to dress and wear your hair and makeup. We shall go to dances and learn how to keep the handsome young men away, and bring them back again. And LaCroix shall pay for all of it and cheerfully, though he will never know why."

"And will I be your little sister forever?"

"Forever is a long time, *petite,*" said Janette softly. She looked up and away, across the room. "I will not lie -- I bore easily. But so long as I am here and am not bored, I will teach you all that you need to know. And let us hope that it will be enough."

Marguerite reached up to plant a kiss on her cheek and Janette felt the heart beat against her own for the barest second. "*Merci,* Janette. But I must wash my face and change!"

"Yes, yes -- hurry! We've taken more time than we ought and you won't be the one to feel the lash of LaCroix's temper tonight."

They hurried, changing the girl's rumpled dress for something white, with frills and skirts. Nothing could be done with the hair but to brush it and Janette could cover the tracks of the child's tears with water and what little makeup was on the dressing table. At the last, she placed the earrings in the child's ears, holding back the hair with a ribbon and bow. And then they hurried down the stairs, to the drawing room.

Janette paused outside the door and, hearing no raised voices, opened it. LaCroix was pacing the room, both Monsieur and Madame Veneuil resting in chairs, looking as if they'd been verbally trampled. No doubt his words and his charm had done more to change their minds than any suggestion, but Janette suspected that he had used a little of his power as well. She pushed Marguerite into the room, then stood back against the door to watch the effect.

Both the mother and father seemed astonished, as the child went to each of them in turn. Madame Veneuil kissed her daughter's cheek, her hand fluttering at the bow in her hair. "Dear Marguerite, how *beautiful* you look!"

Janette smirked inwardly, knowing that the Mother had never seen the child as anything but a financial investment. How lonely the girl's life would have been, without her music and their presence. Perhaps LaCroix had done her a service after all, by investing in her talent.

But when Marguerite stood before LaCroix and curtseyed properly, and he bent at the waist in a bow, then raised her hand to his lips, Janette frowned. For though LaCroix showed no sign of infatuation, then was something in his manner that changed in her presence. Mortals were nothing more than cattle, and inconvenient more often than not, worth notice only for sustenance and amusement. But some quiet part in her rebelled at his taking his amusement from this child, who trusted him so completely, trusted what she could not know would destroy her. Sighing, Janette shook off the mood, relegating it to the recent influence of Nicola, and returned to her seat.

LaCroix glanced over at Janette, an eyebrow raised -- she was right, there'd be a price to pay later for taking so long -- then led Marguerite back to his own seat, still smiling. Standing at the arm of the chair, he cleared his throat. "Marguerite, you were present when your grandfather and I agreed upon the conditions for my patronage. I have not always been attentive--"

"Oh, no --" she interrupted, but quieted quickly when Janette shot her a look and motioned her to silence by placing a finger to her own lips.

"But I have tried to provide for your education and your needs. Your parents, conscientious as they are --" he indicated the poor souls with a wave of his hand, "are concerned about your future and rightly so. I've made them an offer; you may continue to learn, as you have, and I will continue to pay for your education and expenses. Or, should you choose, you may enter society, according to your parents' wishes. And, should you find a young man of adequate means and unquestionable character, I've agreed to pay whatever dowry or settlement his family may think proper."

Rolling her eyes, Janette slumped back in her chair, barely able to keep from laughing. LaCroix was in his element. After filling the heads of these fools with dreams of royalty and wealth beyond imagining, he was allowing their daughter to snatch away that vision by choosing to marry a junior law clerk or younger wastrel son of an old family whose tree had decayed beyond reviving, if she so desired. They, for their own part, were trying to signal to her that their plans had changed – that they no longer wished her to be married. It was more amusing than one of those humorous musicals staged by Messieurs Gilbert and Sullivan.

But Marguerite had no sense of the moment. She rose to her feet and met LaCroix's gaze. "I'll choose whatever you wish me to choose, Monsieur LaCroix. You've been kind to me. And I can't think you would begin to be unkind now, despite what my parents may have said."

For a moment, he seemed taken aback. Then, his hand rose, as if to touch the earrings nestled against the curls. His eyes shot quickly to Janette, and a smile quirked across his lips – he acknowledged that he'd taken her earrings. In response, she arched her neck and looked away with a glance of feigned annoyance. Let him bring up the fact that they took their time, if he dared. She had her own ammunition, this night. Those earrings had purchased her pardon and his money would purchase her a new pair – diamonds, if she had her way.

Janette closed her eyes, that quiet cold stealing across her once more. The parents were instantly joyous, thrilled at the thought of the untold wealth and fame they would enjoy at their daughter's expense. A call was made for champagne and toasts were drunk, though she abstained, still playing the part of the spinster cousin, for she meant to keep close watch of Marguerite. And even Marguerite was allowed a glass, gazing up at LaCroix with adoring eyes that he could not see.

But the evening ended early – they had not fed as yet – and, as the door closed behind them, Marguerite's last "*Merci,*" whispered in her ear, Janette walked numbly to the carriage, still feeling a sudden chill that did not come with the rise of a breeze in the night air.

Even LaCroix seemed to notice her quiet, as he helped her into the carriage. "I think that went quite well," he commented. "You played your part superbly. And as for the earrings –"

Janette settled across from him in the carriage, removing that horrid flat hat, and waved away the thought. "Forget them. Although there *is* something – I spoke to Marguerite. If she's to grow up properly, she'll need some education in arts other than music. You don't want your violinist taken from your hands by the first handsome oboist she meets. And I wouldn't trust *that* woman to know to teach her how to lace a corset, never mind what a proper lady says, and does, at the proper moment."

Nodding, LaCroix closed the carriage door, then signaled out the window to the driver, ignoring the light rain and resting his arm on the door. "A point well taken. What do you suggest?"

"Pay for her dresses and jewelry. Leave her to my care. And give me an hour each evening from her music, and one night each week for proper instruction."

He frowned, still staring out the window. "That will cut into her practice time."

"She's mortal, LaCroix, and she must be *taught*. They don't have the time that we do in which to profit from their mistakes."

"And you're willing to spend such time in common lessons? Even though it'll cost you our wager?" His eyes were suspicious, as he stared at her from across the carriage.

Janette met the gaze evenly. "I've grown... fond of her," she admitted, after a pause. "I could pay off our wager now – I did well with that Boulanger business, better than you. And as for common

lessons --?" Smiling seductively, she tilted her head and gazed out the window. "You've rarely called me that. Or is that what you really think of me?"

"No more common than a diamond in a gutter," said LaCroix, leaning forward to catch her hand. "And as a token of my appreciation – there's a certain shop I know that keeps late hours – or he does if he wants my business. I've heard there are some remarkable stones, just in from Africa –"

She smiled, nodding in the correct places, as they made their way through the streets of Paris, but her eyes were fixed to the world outside the carriage window, unseeing. In the whisper of the rain, she continued to hear Marguerite's heartfelt "*Merci.*"

But Janette knew it was no mercy to continue with this farce. And that it could only end badly.

Chapter Five

"I should have taken her there, in her room." Her lips twisted in a wry smile, she raised her glass, glanced down at the red liquid, then set it on the bar with a sigh. "At least her blood wouldn't have been wasted."

Entranced, Alma was sitting beside her at the corner of the bar, both elbows perched on the edge, her chin cupped in her hands. "But wouldn't LaCroix have been angry?"

"Yes. But then what could he have done to me that he hadn't already done?" She shrugged her shoulders, then glanced beneath her lashes at Alma. "After so many centuries together, even LaCroix's imagination could be stretched to its limits. He would have forgiven me, eventually. She was only mortal, after all. And I would have paid double my portion of the bet – money was often accepted over penitence."

"But... you didn't?"

"No." Again, Janette lifted the wine glass to her lips, this time taking a sip and swallowing. "And perhaps that was for the best, as well. Even in hindsight, it's often difficult to pinpoint the least devastating course of action."

There was quiet between them. Janette continued to sip from her glass, until it was empty. Alma folded her arms on the top of the bar and rested her chin on top of them. "So, what did he buy you?"

Janette lightly touched the ruby heart she'd thoughtlessly chosen that evening. "This." Tilting it, she looked down, the crimson stones catching a stray ray of light and shining in her eyes. "He picked it out, of course. I had no choice but to accept it. It was so much like him, to unknowingly choose a piece too beautiful for me to refuse and yet it was such a cruel reminder..."

Releasing the brooch, Janette rubbed her fingers together, then touched the choker at her throat. "It'd become a game for us, by then – he or I... or even Nicola, would buy a piece of jewelry to commemorate an event or a moment. My jewelry box became our history together." Her eyes glanced across the dance floor, making certain that everything was in place. "But it would backfire on him, every now and again. If I was cross with him, I'd wear a piece from a time he'd prefer not to remember -- a ring purchased after being chased from a place by swordpoint, a buckle or brooch picked off a battlefield from a war which cost him a quarter of his fortune, and such. Nicola's dissent was loud, strident, even violent. I thought my own quiet rebellions much more effective. And fashionable."

"Do you keep all of your jewelry here?"

Janette's smile grew sharp. "Don't even think of it, pretty kitten. I may show you a piece now and again, if you behave. But they're not toys – they aren't to be borrowed or played with."

"Like mortals?"

"Yes." Picking up the empty glass, she ran her finger along the rim, marveling at Alma's uncharacteristic insight. "But jewels last infinitely longer. And they're no more or less than you expect them to be – once they've been properly appraised, of course." Janette chuckled. "There was a time when Nicola, in an attempt to please me, purchased a string of pearls, sight unseen. When he gave them to me, he pressed too hard on one of the beads – it was paste and it exploded. There was powder *everywhere*! And –"

"What about Marguerite?"

Alma's voice was quiet, but loud enough to stop Janette in mid-remembrance. When her hand fell to the ruby heart of its own accord, she quickly reached for a cigarette from the pack that rested atop of the bar. "What about your young mortal?"

"He'll be there tomorrow." Her head still resting on her hands, Alma shrugged lightly. "Or not. As you said, *It's better that they not matter*."

As Janette lit the cigarette, she was surprised to find her hand shaking. "But sometimes they do," she whispered, watching as the paper and tobacco caught flame, flaring gold, then red. "Sometimes they matter too much..."

Chapter Six

For the tenth time in as many minutes, Janette adjusted the collar of Marguerite's white blouse, arranging the curl that fell over one shoulder carefully against the neck. "I don't know *why* I allowed him to choose this blouse," she scolded.

But Marguerite raised her hand, touching Janette's. "It's fine. If LaCroix prefers that I wear this blouse, then it's fine."

"He wanted you to wear that horrid yellow party frock," reminded Janette. "To an audition? No wonder men's fashion has fallen to the wayside!" Still, she stepped back, admiring the effect.

Marguerite was *not* beautiful. Her hair, despite all of Janette's best efforts and attempts at wigs, dyes, and tinting, remained a muddy brown color. True, it suited her skin, which was more olive-toned than white. And the deeper brown of her eyes shone well with the contrast. Nothing could be done with her features – a thin nose, and thin lips, but the color of the lips was naturally pleasing. Less makeup, rather than more, had been the answer. And Janette had been able to use highlights to cover the high cheekbones, so unfashionable for the period.

She could find no fault with the skirt, or the hourglass figure, also fashionable. If Marguerite ate at all, it was only because Janette or one of the maids hounded her, having to pry the bow from her hand and replace it with a fork, which made the requisite corset almost obsolete. Her nails, at least, were strong and finely cut, so they wouldn't interfere with her art. And that's when Janette noticed that the hand that held the violin case loosely at Marguerite's side was shaking.

It was cool where they stood, in the corridor to the dressing rooms of the concert hall. The summer heat of the Paris evening did not reach this place, as it nestled against the earth, below the level of the

street. But this lack of heat was not enough to chill a mortal heart. Only fear could do that. And Marguerite's fear was foolish, in the face of her talent.

Taking her free hand, Janette looked into the eyes of her student -- hers, now, as well as LaCroix's. For Little Marguerite *had* grown in the past three years, from a child to a young woman. Janette, despite her own prediction, had *not* grown bored, her attention hadn't wandered, as she'd passed along the experience of centuries on how to handle the world and men and their ways. But it was in her instruction of how to handle LaCroix that her teaching had been precise – for mortal Marguerite would never have survived the many mistakes she herself had made over the centuries.

"Have no fear for your music, little sister," she said, placing her hand on Marguerite's shoulder and nodding solemnly. "You're among the best that Paris has to offer. And you love it too well to fail."

Her answering smile was hesitant. "I trust the music, Janette. And it's not for the music's sake I'm afraid to fail."

Closing her eyes, Janette turned her head away, her hand still resting on Marguerite's shoulder. No matter how much she had tried to interest her in the handsome young men they found at dances – some of whom had mysteriously disappeared from the Paris streets later that evening -- Marguerite only had eyes for LaCroix, shining like a diamond at the smallest attention from him, the slightest word. And, still, LaCroix did not seem to see. As Marguerite was so taken with him, he was too entranced by the beauty of her music to see the heart that lay behind it, playing only for him.

"Janette, tell me... why are you still so young?"

Her eyes shot open, but she kept her face turned away, her lips drawn into a grim line. She'd seen the question in the girl's eyes a hundred times before. Only so often could she laugh off the avoidance of mirrors, her skin being sensitive to the rays of the sun, her aversion to foods, save for an occasional sip of wine, or glass of a vintage that Marguerite's palate was too 'young' to properly appreciate. It seemed only proper that now, as the child LaCroix had so carefully tutored – his *investment* – was about to take her place in the world of music, that she should begin to question the strange ways of her benefactor. Fate, as usual, had timed everything *perfectly*.

But Janette produced a wounded smile, touching her hand lightly to the throat of her dress, in surprise. "Marguerite, such a question? We discussed the things that one woman never asks another and I believe that headed the list... unless, of course, you wish to flatter me?"

Marguerite started. "Oh, no! I didn't mean to offend you, dear Janette, please, I beg your pardon. You're as lovely as any woman could be. Lovelier. As lovely as you have always been –" She paused, her eyes narrowing as she met Janette's gaze. "But you've always been this lovely. When I was a child and you came to Grandfather's rooms, I thought then that I'd give anything to look as beautiful as you."

Forcing herself to take a breath, Janette kept the smile on her lips, knowing that her own thoughts at the time had been focused on her gambling... or on dining on that child's blood.

"When you came again and again to visit me, you never seemed to change. I've grown to a woman, but you're still the same. As is LaCroix." Puzzled, she shook her head, her hands clasping the violin case to her chest, as if for comfort. "I've often thought about it, questioned whether my memory was faulty. Even that other man, who often came to my recitals –"

"Nicola," supplied Janette automatically, her mind racing to come up with some explanation. LaCroix had trusted her to deal with questions like this. And if Marguerite's sudden curiosity affected her performance and her audition for a seat at the symphony, she knew he might well be angered enough

to take vengeance on them both. Even she might not be able to shield Marguerite from LaCroix's wrath.

"Yes. We saw him one evening, at the ballet. Remember?"

"Nicola has... other interests."

"But he looked the *same*."

Janette swallowed and closed her eyes. LaCroix had been right -- the bloodline had run true from grandfather to granddaughter. Marguerite was not *clever* in anything but her music, but given time she had proven she could put together pieces of a puzzle and come up with an answer. It was an achievement that bested many of the beautiful, empty-headed young things with which they had shared the dance floors these past three years and Janette had prided herself on the uncommon intelligence and maturity of her young charge. Now, that same intelligence might be Marguerite's undoing, especially since she had not only identified herself and LaCroix as 'unusual,' but had included Nicola in that classification.

Opening her eyes, she faced Marguerite, and placed her hands over the hands that held the violin. "We'll speak of this later, little sister. For the moment, concentrate only on your music. That's what LaCroix would wish."

The brown eyes met hers, a shy smile crossing the lips. "Do you promise? You'll tell me *all*?"

"All." Janette repeated the word, knowing that she broke her promise in speaking it aloud. There was no way Marguerite could be told everything. But breaking the promise bothered her less than coming up with a plausible explanation. Promises had never meant so much to her as they had to LaCroix and Nicola, but she'd always thought that was because she was a woman -- men might keep promises among themselves, but rarely shared the gesture with her gender.

For her own part, Marguerite seemed pacified, even excited by the possibility. Leaning forward, she kissed Janette first on one cheek, then the other. "Thank you, Janette. I won't disappoint LaCroix. Or you."

A bitter smile touched her lips as she heard the words -- as always, she was second to LaCroix. But the smile disappeared as a man, carrying a board covered with papers, appeared. "How may I help you, Mesdemoiselles?"

Janette stepped forward to speak, but LaCroix appeared down the length of the corridor, hailing the man. "Monsieur Bidault?" He strode forward quickly, shifting his cane in his hand and removing his top hat. Raising a hand to her lips, Janette decided that nothing suited LaCroix so well as the evening wear of the age.

Reaching them, he gave the smaller man a bow, Janette received a nod, and Marguerite a smile. "You must forgive me, Monsieur, but I abandoned the ladies so that I might investigate your magnificent hall. Only the best will do for my prize pupil."

Bidault glanced down at the papers in his hand. "You must be Monsieur LaCroix? Here for the audition?"

"Just so." LaCroix nodded again.

"If you will follow me, please?"

There was not room enough for them to walk three abreast. LaCroix took Marguerite's arm without a second thought, leading her forward. Pursing her lips, Janette trailed behind. If she was not so fond of the girl, she would be jealous. But any spark of envy always faded quickly, when she thought of the warmth of Marguerite's skin and heart. Even if LaCroix should turn his amorous attentions to the girl, she would not long survive. And, somehow, the thought of this flower being bled dry and preserved for eternity no longer sat well with her.

"You'll love the sound of the place," explained LaCroix, to the girl beside him. "I shouted and was nearly blown backwards by the echo. There hasn't been such a place with acoustics like this since –" Stopping in mid-sentence, he glanced over his shoulder at Janette. "-- For some time."

Outwardly, she smiled, as he turned back to Marguerite. Inwardly, her heart was cold in her breast. LaCroix did not often forget himself, or his time. But here he was about to tell Marguerite that he had lived in another age, a hundred, perhaps five hundred years before. He was beginning to rely too much on their familiarity. Yet he still could not see the eyes that looked up at him with rapt attention, held him in adoration.

Then Bidault stopped at a junction. There was a door at the end of one hall, toward which he nodded. "If you'll wait here, Monsieur Lamoureaux will be with us shortly. Until then, may I confirm some of the details of the application?"

"Of course." LaCroix stepped closer to man.

Janette moved forward, placing her arm around Marguerite's shoulders, some of the girl's excitement passing into her and warming her cold heart. "Very soon, *cher*," she whispered. "I would never have thought it would come to this."

"The name of the applicant is M. Veneuil?"

LaCroix nodded. "Violin."

"I see no mention of an academy?" Bidault looked up at LaCroix with questioning eyes, his mustache twitching. "An oversight?"

"Private instruction, only," was LaCroix's smooth answer. "A list of tutors and references may be found accompanying the application?"

Bidault lifted the paper, glanced down, and nodded. "Ah, yes. Monsieur Lamoureaux will review them." Tapping the paper with his forefinger, he nodded. "We are lacking, then, only the applicant?"

Janette looked up sharply and saw LaCroix arch an eyebrow. "Not at all – Mademoiselle Veneuil is here." He pointed back toward Marguerite.

The little mustache twitched again. Bidault smiled and looked back at the paper. "Ah, Monsieur LaCroix, you're making sport of me. Seriously, where is the young man with such impressive credentials?"

LaCroix straightened, drawing himself to his full height, his hands wrapped around the length of his cane. "The young man is a young *woman*. Mademoiselle Veneuil is the applicant for the position of violinist for the *Societe Nationale de Musique*."

Tightening her grip on Marguerite's shoulder after she felt a shiver go through the girl, Janette asked, "Is there some difficulty?" Ignoring LaCroix's sharp look, she fixed her gaze on Bidault.

The man was almost laughing. "The problem, Mademoiselle, is that this application cannot be accepted. To have a woman in the orchestra? It would be unthinkable! We'd become the laughingstocks of Paris, of the *world*." Tearing the papers from the clip, he held them to LaCroix. "I'm sorry, Monsieur. We cannot accept this application."

LaCroix took the papers from the man, then glanced down at them. "There must be some mistake." As Bidault turned away and began walking down the corridor, toward the office he'd indicated earlier, LaCroix followed, grabbing the man's shoulder and spinning him around. "Perhaps you don't understand," he stated, voice silky and smooth as ice. "I have donated a respectable sum to this organization, since it was founded. I will *not* be treated like a common subscriber!"

Bidault's face was red. Angrily, he brushed LaCroix's hand from his jacket. "And *you* must understand, Monsieur, that we've appreciated your patronage over the years. And if you find a young man, with the talents you have described in that application, we will consider ourselves fortunate to be able to interview and audition him. But if we entertain applications for every mistress our patrons bring to us, we would have not time to audition *real* musicians." Pointing at Marguerite, he added, "Why not take her to the opera? She's not pretty enough for the front of the chorus, but if she's light on her feet, they may let her dance at the wings."

"This... is... an... outrage!" roared LaCroix. Raising his cane in the air, he struck Bidault on the shoulder, spinning the man away and into the wall.

There was barely time to act. Janette abandoned the sobbing Marguerite and ran to LaCroix. Turning him around, she held him in place, fingers gripping his coat and shirt, anywhere she could find purchase. She drew his face close to hers -- his eyes gold, his fangs extended and snarling -- hiding his altered features from Bidault. His nails were like talons as he grabbed her shoulders, still roaring, "Let me loose, damn you!"

"Not here!" Pulling him closer, ignoring the nails that drew blood through the cloth of her dress, she held onto him with all of her might. "LaCroix, you'll ruin *everything*! For yourself. For Marguerite. For the Music! Stop... think!"

His eyes still shone gold, but they fixed on hers, as her words got through. "If you do this, we'll have to leave," she continued. "And in a hurry. This would not be overlooked. There's still a chance to save this, to save the music. But you must tread *lightly*. You always caution Nicola about acting before thinking. Take your own advice. Calm *down*."

As he stared at her, the glow faded from his eyes, the tight grip released her shoulders. LaCroix smiled down at her, then pressed his lips against her forehead. "*Merci*, Janette. You're right. There's too much to lose."

Behind them, a scream sounded. Janette whirled and, at the same time, LaCroix looked up.

Marguerite held her hand before her mouth, the other clutching the violin case to her chest. Stifling another scream, she ran down another corridor, away from them, turning a corner and disappearing from sight.

LaCroix took a step to go after her, but Janette caught his shirt front. "Stay!" she commanded. "Only you can deal with these men, as a man. She'll be terrified of you."

He glanced over his shoulder and Janette followed his gaze, Bidault had run for the office door -- they could hear the echo of raised voices from inside. Then LaCroix looked back down the corridor, where Marguerite had run.

"They saw *nothing*," she pressed, pushing him toward the door. "Deal with them. And remember, this is *your* fault -- not hers or mine. Only you would be fool enough to forget yourself and choose a woman for your grand scheme!"

The eyes that met hers were angry and hard -- angry at her for reminding him that this mistake *was* his own and that he could blame no other, hard because it was not a mistake he would forgive lightly or make again. Still, he looked back a third time, then pointed toward the corridor. "Deal with her!" he shouted, running in the other direction, for the office door. "I leave it in your hands."

"As always," Janette whispered, not caring whether he heard. Gathering her skirts, she ran as quickly as she could down the corridor, calling Marguerite's name. The corridor led to the stage itself. She paused in the wings, walking carefully, looking around.

LaCroix had been right -- the echoes of Marguerite's sobs filled the empty space. The sheer magnitude and the grandeur startled her for a moment. The light was dim, the barest glare of gas jets along the walls. In this darkness, Janette could well imagine an audience, breath held in a hush, as the conductor raised his baton and signaled a flood of perfect sound that would light the place more brilliantly than any candle, or oil lamp, or gas.

But the vision was a thing of the moment. Shaking her head, Janette tried to pin down the source of the sobbing, the dim light proving no obstacle to her heightened senses. And when she found Marguerite, she could only smile.

The girl was sitting on a chair, her arms leaning over the back, her head on her arms. She'd probably walked blindly into the chairs prepared for the orchestra's next rehearsal, but she was seated at the place to which LaCroix had deigned to raise her -- the chair of the first violinist. Janette walked softly, then stood behind the chair. "Little sister?"

Marguerite started, then rose from the chair, backing away. "Monster!" she spat, her voice wavering.

The word sent a cold chill through Janette. Had it been spoken by any other mortal their brief span of life would have been reduced to seconds. But the fear mixed with sorrow in Marguerite's tone touched a place within her that had been empty for decades and which only the girl had warmed. Nodding slightly, Janette looked down at the floor. "Yes, little sister. That's what we are, monsters. This is what I wished to spare you. And now... you will hate us?"

"Hate...you?"

Janette looked up at the surprise in Marguerite's voice. Holding her hands wide before her, she asked, "But... you ran away. Surely, you must hate us, despise us for what we are?"

"No." Rubbing her hand beneath her nose, a childish gesture Janette found charming, Marguerite took a step closer. "How could I hate you, Janette? After all you've taught me? And... if he loves the music, he can't be a monster. No monster could love the music so much as he."

Something within Janette tore in half -- to reconcile Marguerite with LaCroix and herself would bind them. The girl would have no hope of ever freeing her soul. There'd be no future opportunity like this, to frighten or cajole or convince her to leave them. She could do it. With golden eyes and lowered fangs, she could send the girl screaming into the night and out of LaCroix's grasp... forever.

But then, she, too, would lose the presence of Marguerite, her 'little sister.' And she was not so brave or so selfless that she could drive away this present joy, even to save it for the mortal world.

Holding out her arms, Janette met the girl's eyes. It was no enchantment or mesmerism that brought the girl into her embrace, but the friendship they had shared. Despite the warmth of the mortal in her arms, Janette's heart was cold. But still her mind worked on plots and plans and devices that might drive the wedge between this mortal and LaCroix.

She looked upward, at the grace and beauty of the place, then drew back from Marguerite, after a second's pause. "You understand -- they will not let you play because you're a woman?"

Marguerite nodded, then stepped back and picked up the violin case from the chair. Her eyes swept around the place and Janette saw the wonder and beauty of it being recorded, in the halls of her memory. The girl was being denied that which was rightfully hers. Perhaps she would grow angry and bitter later, when she truly understood what it was she had lost, but the moment was too large and grand and dreadful to fully touch her soul. And Janette knew there was one thing to be done that might make the memory sweet, instead of sour.

Placing her hands on Marguerite's shoulder, she guided her to the chair of the first violinist and seated her there. As always, Marguerite took her direction without a murmur, only questioning in a glance. But Janette smiled as she took the violin case from the girl's hands, opened the catch, and held it before her. "Play," she commanded, her voice softer and kinder than LaCroix's traditional order had ever been. "Play, Marguerite, this once, in this place."

It was only a moment's pause, then Marguerite did as she had been commanded... as she had always done. Her hands reached for the violin -- her grandfather's that LaCroix had played on that first visit -- and the bow. She positioned the instrument with the greatest of care, then lifted the bow.

Placing the violin case on another chair, Janette seated herself across from Marguerite and closed her eyes, letting the sound envelop her. For Marguerite chose to play the first song she had learned at the hands of LaCroix. It was a sorrowful melody, but it soared throughout the great space, echoing strong and pure. The music became a living thing, played there as it would and could never be played again.

Behind her eyes, Janette no longer saw the villa in Milan, the floor littered with broken pottery. Now, she remembered only the dim lights of that squalid tenement, the chill of the room and the malnourished mortal cub, who played bravely and sweetly, until the blood ran from her fingers. Had she played for LaCroix that night, as well? Or had she been playing only for her future, for her grandfather, for salvation from the place and squalor into which fate had dropped her?

Janette's eyes opened as a sound disturbed her musings. In the dim light, she searched the hall, then the wings of the stage. It was there that she saw LaCroix, and Bidault -- some feet from LaCroix and a cloth held to his head, she noted with amusement -- and a third man, who stood mostly in shadow. Rising quietly, she moved away from Marguerite, but the musician's eyes were closed tightly, as they had been during that first recital.

LaCroix moved away from them as she approached, joining her where the wings opened onto the stage. He inclined his head in a light gesture, toward Marguerite. "She's well?"

"No thanks to you." Turning her back to him, Janette looked across the empty stage, to the solitary figure. "I thought to give her something that would make this memory easier to bear. To have been shown this and then denied it would have been too cruel. At least there will be this moment to comfort her."

"The first of many, if there's any hope," whispered LaCroix, moving behind her.

Janette turned her head, but froze in place, as his fingers ran along the wounds his nails had opened in her shoulders... which were already closing. "What?"

"I spoke with them, Lamoureaux and his toady. I was making no headway, but the music began. They had only to hear it for themselves."

Janette turned completely in his arms, her hands clasped together and held to her heart. "They'll place her in the orchestra?" she whispered, disbelieving.

"In time." LaCroix did not look down at her. Instead, his gaze moved past her, still fixed to the stage and the violin. "She'll train as one of the substitutes. It will only be a matter of time before one falls ill –"

"Or has an unavoidable accident?"

His smile twisted, but still he didn't look at her. "Perhaps. And then Marguerite will take the stage, as is her due. In a subordinate role, to be certain. We can't change the will of centuries in an afternoon. But she *will* be the first."

Janette placed her arms around him, holding him close. "It will be so hard for her. They won't accept her. You know they won't. LaCroix, can't we protect her?"

"We can't kill all of Paris. Not anymore." His hand rose to her neck, playing with her hair. "But they'll change their minds when they hear the music. They'll have to."

Still, the music soared behind them. Janette held him tightly, as much to keep him away from Marguerite as to keep him for herself. "You'll let her go, then."

"Go?" He chuckled in her ear. "Dear Janette, this is only the beginning! Let her go? Why on earth would I want to? She's mine. Her music's *mine*."

Janette looked up and away quickly, needing to see Marguerite, certain that some invisible chain had wrapped itself tighter around the mortal throat, but LaCroix's hands held her in place. "Ah, you're sad – you've lost your wager," he cooed.

Her eyes still staring in the dim light, Janette forced a wry smile. "Yes, you're right," she lied. "I've lost the bet. But I'll pay my losses gratefully."

"No matter. I forgive you the debt. In fact, I think I owe you something."

"Owe *me*?"

"For that." He nodded toward Marguerite. "I would have lost her, if it hadn't been for you. You brought her music back to me. That's a debt I could never adequately repay. But I shall try. Something more for your collection, perhaps? Another brooch? A ring? Or that diamond I wouldn't buy for you?"

Her heart cold, Janette shook her head. "No. Nothing. I want nothing to remind me of this."

LaCroix leaned close again, whispering in her ear. "Dear Janette, you *need* nothing to remind you of this. We remember *everything*."

"I know," she whispered, placing her hand over his. "Oh, how I *do* know."

Chapter Seven

The bartender had refilled her glass. Janette picked it up, lifted it to her lips, then lowered it suspiciously. A small swizzle stick floated in the glass, topped with a heart and a cupid. Taking out the offending object with two of her fingernails, she tossed it to the top of the bar. "Remind me to fire him."

"You fired him last week. And the week before."

"So, I'll fire him again."

"If it makes you feel better." Alma sat up on the barstool, gave the bartender a little wave to get his attention, then very carefully ran the swizzle stick across her lips. Having removed the blood, she threaded the thing through the lace at the neckline of her dress.

Janette rolled her eyes and turned around, again looking over the club. "You have no class, Alma. Or subtlety."

"I know. That's why I'm popular. But don't you think he's even the *tiniest* bit cute?"

Holding her drink up to the light and eyeing the color, Janette smirked. "Of course -- why do you think I hired him? Rank *does* have its privileges. And if we have eternity to spend, why not spend it surrounded with pretty things?"

"*Now* you're talking." Then she tapped Janette on the shoulder. "So, what'd he buy you then?"

"Is *that* all that interests you -- what LaCroix bought me?"

"Well, no." Alma pouted. "But I figure I'll be in your will someday --"

"Dream on, little fool." Janette sipped at her drink, then frowned, catching sight of a young vampire who'd been barred from the club because he'd taken liberties with the stock. With a nod and a commanding gesture, she got the attention of the bouncer, who removed the offender promptly. She raised her glass to the bouncer in gratitude, then turned back to the bar. "Where was I? Oh, yes -- those pearls that Nicola purchased --"

"No. You were talking about Marguerite."

Janette shook her head and stared into her glass. "Alma, are you really as dense as you seem?"

Alma preened, playing with the lace along the so-called neckline of her dress. "Some people find it attractive."

"Those 'boy-toys' you seem to find?"

"You have to play young to stay young."

Closing her eyes, Janette leaned her forehead on the bar. "I can't believe we're having this conversation. Alma, go away, before I lose my sanity and what's left of my self-control."

"But I want to hear what happened to Marguerite."

Janette sighed, but didn't move. "I don't *want* to talk about Marguerite any more. Why did I even *start*?"

"Because you were warning me off mortals. And it worked."

Curious, Janette opened an eye. "It did?"

"Sure." She was still flapping the lace absently. "He's out there, cooling his heels in the snow... and I'm not going to show." Alma glanced over her shoulder. "But I'll make it up to him tomorrow."

Closing her eyes, Janette sighed again. "It's a good thing the one who brought you across walked into the light. Because if I ever found him, I'd kill him myself."

Alma patted her bare shoulder. "Now, now, let's not get maudlin." The hand was removed immediately, when Janette raised her head and glared. Alma met the glare with a smile. "*Please* finish the story, Janette. It's like a soap opera, you know? If you miss Friday, you come back Monday and Blaire, who's been pregnant for eighteen month's with Peter's child, had the baby, married Peter, had an affair with Raoul, divorced Peter, married Raoul, and then she's pregnant with Peter's baby *again*..."

"All right, all right!" Throwing up her hand in surrender, Janette reached for her glass and took a long swallow. "*If* you'll leave me alone."

Alma looked down, the picture of abject repentance. "Sure. If that's what you want." She sneaked a peek at Janette, from beneath her eyelashes. "It's almost over, right? Because if it's anything like Peter, Blaire, and Raoul --" She bit her lip, then nodded, as Janette fixed her with a steady stare. "Okay. So what happened? What did he buy you?"

For a moment longer, she continued to stare, wondering how much of Alma was real and how much was artifice. She couldn't be *that* simple and have survived so long, could she? But then she looked back at the glass of blood that sat before her. And a faint reflection stared back, tiny rubies set in gold, glistening in her ears.

"LaCroix didn't have *time* to buy me anything," she said softly, stunned by the brilliance of the red-on-red reflection. "I took Marguerite back to the flat we shared -- I'd had her moved from her parents when I took over her instruction and I'd lived there on a semi-regular basis, as a chaperone -- and, as I promised, I gave her 'the talk.'"

"Oh? I know that one. About the birds and the bees and the flowers --"

Janette groaned inwardly, but smiled sweetly. "No, Alma. I'd given her *that* talk much earlier, especially since there were times I'd had to leave her alone at a dance while I attended to... other things." She shook her head sadly. "Although it hadn't mattered -- she only had eyes for LaCroix, poor thing. Which made it even more imperative that she understand what it meant to be like us -- how we lived and what we did. Why her music was so special to LaCroix." Closing her eyes, she shuddered. "And *still* she asked me to turn her, to bring her across."

Chapter Eight

Janette had been prepared for the question, but it still stung. The bright face, the shining brown eyes -- the life positively *beamed* from her. "Out of the question."

"Why?"

Marguerite had perched herself on a footstool beside the couch, where Janette reclined. The windows were open, catching the cooler breezes of the summer night, guiding them inside. High as they were, on the fourth floor of the hostelry, Janette caught winking starlight, as it fought the glow from the electric lights that studded the street below. It occurred to her that soon, with Paris lighting the night with electricity, seeing the stars would be a thing of the past.

But Marguerite was waiting.

"Because you'd lose your music." Grabbing a pillow from the couch, she tossed it at Marguerite. "Foolish girl, you *haven't* been listening."

"I have." Those brown eyes blinked. "But there's so much to understand, Janette. *Why* would I lose my music?"

"Oh, you'd play well enough, better than LaCroix *ever* could, I dare say." She smiled at the thought and leaned back against the remaining pillows. "We don't know exactly. I suppose it's a compensation, for having such short lives. Your hands, your heart, can perform wonders with the music that we *never* could. And, remember," she leaned forward, running her fingers along the girl's cheek, "if you lose the music, you'll lose LaCroix."

Fear filled the brown eyes. Marguerite rose to her feet and walked to the window. "I can't believe that he'd abandon me, after being so kind --"

"He wouldn't. He'd kill you. He'd suck every drop of blood from you, then leave you lying in the dirt." When Marguerite turned disbelieving eyes to her, Janette rose to her feet and waved a finger. "Trust me, little sister. I've seen him do it. I've done it myself. Speaking of which --" Walking to the cloak rack beside the door, Janette threw a light shawl around her shoulders. "It's close to dawn. I'll be back then. And now you know *why* I rail at you when you leave the shades open, yes?"

"Oh, yes." Marguerite ran across the room, positioning herself between Janette and the door. "You're going to kill someone, aren't you?"

The words were said so matter-of-factly, without any horror or sorrow, that some part of Janette died. She touched the girl's chin with her hand. "Yes, little sister," she admitted softly. "Someone will die tonight, because I must feed."

She moved to go, but the girl caught her hand. Surprised, Janette stared at her. "What? Are you afraid to be alone? For LaCroix will not bother you – he gave me his word --"

"No." Marguerite shook her head. "I could never be afraid of LaCroix."

"Then you're a fool. Because he scares *me* silly, at times."

The mortal hand tightened over her own. "Take me with you."

"Now?" Janette stared, surprised, then shook her head. "Oh, no, little sister. LaCroix would have my heart for that. You may be set on leaving this world quickly, but I haven't seen enough of it, yet, and I'm in no hurry to leave." Lifting Marguerite's hand to her lips, she kissed the knuckles, then released her. "Go to sleep, little sister. Dream of your triumph. It'll be a hard road, perhaps a long one, but you've done well by the muses this evening. And they'll have to bless you for your efforts, if they haven't already."

Before more could be said, Janette slipped out the door. She paused there, realizing now why the Veneuils had taken that step of locking their daughter in her room... was it so many years ago? Only

three? Leaning against the wood, she waited a moment, afraid that Marguerite would follow her into the night. But the doorknob didn't move. And she heard footsteps inside, as the child crossed to her room.

Relieved, Janette arranged the shawl over her shoulder and smiled. Feeding was always a joy in summer, when the warm nights brought out the young hearts. There'd be a variety available -- students from the Sorbonne, young farmers bringing their wares into town, and men who'd outgrown their youth but not the urge to find a warm bed and a willing body. So many from which she might choose...

She hurried down the steps and into the night, not glancing behind her, at the window of their flat. If Marguerite was watching, she wished to take no notice. And as she slipped among the streets and alleys, she thought again of what it might mean to bring Marguerite across. They could hunt together, on summer nights like this. They might laugh, taking their pleasure where they would, and returning to the flat before the morning sun rose, to enjoy a day of sleepy leisure and quiet talk of fashion, and men, and why they bothered with either.

Deciding the best selection would be found along the banks of the Seine -- there was something about hunting near water that excited her -- Janette took to the air. She had only walked the length of a street, when she heard her name called. Surprised, she turned, and found LaCroix landing before her. He had changed from his evening clothes into something more suitable for the hunt.

Or so she thought. "What's wrong?" she asked, panic suddenly gripping her heart. If he had touched Marguerite... .

Tossing his head, LaCroix turned his eyes to the water. "There's a problem with my business prospects in Dublin. I must leave immediately. And you know how I hate to travel alone."

Janette shrugged. "So take Nicola --"

"He's nowhere to be found." Choking back an angry sound, LaCroix fixed his gaze, his eyes locking with hers. "You'll come with me."

It was *not* a request. And Janette wondered what could have possessed her, that she might imagine Marguerite and she might spend eternity without that shadow of LaCroix hanging over them, controlling their every move. Which brought to mind another point --

"Marguerite was very upset," she said, looking away. "I spoke with her about what we are."

"And?"

Janette met his gaze quickly, knowing that he was in no mood for games. "She took it well. And I've got good reason to hope she'll no longer forget to draw the shades. After that first morning --"

LaCroix laughed at her expression. "Good. Then let her think on it for a few days. Come back with me, you've clothing still at our flat -- it should be enough to travel. And I'll buy you more in Dublin, should your remnants prove to be out of fashion."

"But she won't know where we've gone!"

"We'll cable her, once we're on the train." The honey disappeared from his tone as he warned, "Janette, there's no time for foolishness."

"I know. It's just that I haven't fed."

Touching the curve of her neck with his hand, he smiled. "Ah, neither have I. We've time for a quick bite, at the very least. As I was flying past the bridge, I caught sight of a pair of young lovers – there they are." He pointed them out to her, then bowed and offered her his arm. "Shall we?"

Again, there was no way to refuse him – not that she *would* have. Hunger was rising hot and red within her. It was a warm night, a night for blood and death. And if Nicola had chosen this night of all nights to absent himself – blast him – then she'd do as LaCroix said and accompany him to Dublin. How he got his information eluded her, but he was usually right. Her own fortune was growing at a small enough rate, so the preservation of LaCroix's money was still important to her continued survival, at least in the fashion to which she was accustomed. And fashion cost *money*.

So they killed the lovers. The male was handsome, at least, and young, his blood still sweet with youth and love and summer nights. The bodies were tossed into the river, after the necks were broken. And yet another pair of families would wonder what happened to the young ones, who ran away one night and into eternity... unless they washed ashore.

Janette had never been bothered by thoughts like that. But as LaCroix twisted the mortal girl's neck, snapping it to keep her from turning, she saw the face of Marguerite and had to turn away. The girl never moved from her thoughts, even as they flew back to LaCroix's flat, packed what items they could, and went to the train station.

Before they boarded the train to Calais, she cabled Marguerite at the flat, telling her only that they'd been forced to leave on business and would be back within a fortnight, if not sooner. LaCroix had fumed and fussed at the delay, but she studiously ignored him, telling Marguerite where they could be reached if she had a problem, or ran short of ready cash. She finished just as the train arrived and they boarded in haste, preparing the carriage, and themselves for an uninterrupted journey through the daylight world.

It was not until they reached Dublin, two nights later, that she began to relax. There were shops there that remembered her custom, including a woman who made lace finer than any Janette had seen in half a century. She bought several yards, envisioning a dress for Marguerite's eventual debut, then spent LaCroix's money freely on clothing for herself, though she bought him some new handkerchiefs – he'd fed messily too often and his old ones were spotted with blood.

It was nearly eleven when she returned to the house that LaCroix owned, in the center of Dublin. The shopping basket on her arm, she entered the house, tossing her shawl on the table by the door. "LaCroix, you must tell me if these handkerchiefs are fine enough. They're the best I could find, but we could stop in London, if the linen isn't –"

He was sitting in a chair by the stove. His hands were folded, resting on his right leg, which he'd drawn across the other. LaCroix simply looked at her, then nodded toward a paper that sat on the table beside him.

Janette met his eyes, but there was no clue there – they were blank, carefully and artfully hiding his thoughts. A lump rose in her throat when she glanced down at the paper – had something happened to Nicola? If LaCroix hadn't been able to find him –

Her fingers trembled as she picked up the cable. It was in French, which she read easily enough. And her heart stopped as one word leaped out of context, shattering the night –

Marguerite.

"Her father thought he should let us know," LaCroix said tonelessly, staring across the room. "That greedy sow of a wife wants us to pay for funeral expenses. They're burying her tomorrow."

Janette's fingers curled around the edges of the paper, one nail punching a neat half moon. "How?"

"She was attacked last evening while she was walking along the river." Those eyes gazed up at her. "Something I'm told you often did together -- taking evening walks." He looked away again. "It could have been a robbery. I'm to take comfort in the fact that she wasn't violated." A choking laugh rose from his throat. "Violated? Some mortal thug has taken music from the world, and I'm supposed to be pleased that he didn't take --"

"I should have been there. I *would* have been there." Snarling, Janette turned on LaCroix, fangs extended and eyes gold and flashing. "It's *your* fault! You made me come here! If I'd been there, I could have stopped it. I could have *saved* her!"

He caught her wrists only inches from his face, his own eyes glowing gold. He held her there, then flipped her, pinning his arm across her throat, another holding her wrists, pulling her arms away. Janette continued to snarl, continued to struggle, until she felt his lips at her throat.

But there was no sharp pain, not bite, no tearing of flesh. LaCroix's lips rested against her neck until she quieted, and then for a long time after. Eventually, he slid his grip from her wrists, wrapping his arms around her. And still they sat there, frozen in their own thoughts. She wanted tears to come, but they hovered behind her eyes, beyond her reach. The solemn quiet of the tomb stole over her, leaving her trapped in lassitude.

His lips moved from her throat, to her ear, his voice a whisper. "Well, my dear Janette, I've lost my music. And you've lost your mortal friend. What *shall* we do?"

"I want to *kill* something."

"There's a body in the back room." She turned her head to look at him and a twisted smile crossed his lips. "It didn't help."

Sighing, Janette rested her head against his shoulder again. "Must you *always* kill the messenger?"

"It used to be tradition." He chuckled lightly. "No, I'm in error -- the bearers of bad news were always feted. It was the bearers of good news who were sacrificed."

"Well, it *does* save that awkwardness about the gratuity." Stirring herself, she left him and walked across the room, adjusting her dress, which had twisted around in their brief struggle. "This *is* your fault."

"Is it?"

"I never would have known her. You brought her to my attention."

"Ah, but you offered to care for her," noted LaCroix. He walked to the table and started going through the basket. The handkerchiefs were tossed aside with a curt, "They'll serve."

"On your behalf --"

He tumbled the contents of the basket onto the table and lifted the lace, holding the white pattern against his dark jacket. "*Not* for Nicholas, I hope?"

"For Marguerite." Janette turned away, as she caught sight of the crumpled note. She'd dropped it by the chair when she'd lunged at LaCroix. Picking it up, she sighed. "Too late even to have her buried in it. And we won't make the funeral -- it *would* be a daylight service."

"Oh come, Janette, she was only *mortal*, after all." When she frowned at him, he cocked his head, studying her. "Must I spend eternity in debt to you?"

"If you had any sense. Which, at times, I doubt."

"I concluded my business before word arrived. We leave tonight."

Again, it was not a question. And now there was no reason to fight. "If you wish."

Throwing down the lace, LaCroix strode across the room. Pinning her elbows to her sides, he stared down at her. "If *I* wish? What do *you* wish, Janette? What will make you happy?"

"Nothing." She rested her head against his chest, ignoring the tightness of his grip. "Nothing that you can do, or say, or give. Just... take me back to Paris, LaCroix. I'm dead inside."

"Nicholas will cheer you up," he promised, kissing the top of her head. "He always does. I think I should look in on him again, see what amusement he's found. His absence was most inconvenient."

"It cost us Marguerite," said Janette softly.

"Yes. I suppose it did." Releasing her, he swept the handkerchiefs from the table and headed down the hall toward the staircase, to pack his bag.

Janette wandered the room for a few minutes, picking up pieces of this and that, knowing that her own cases were mostly still packed -- she was not as thorough as LaCroix when it came to packing and unpacking, although either of them were always prepared to leave on a moment's notice, with nothing more than the clothing on their backs, letters of credit or reference in their pockets, and whatever coins or valuables they had on hand. It was their way. For centuries, it had been their way. And when Nicola had joined them, it had become his way, as well.

It was only when she came across her traveling box and opened the small jewelry case that the enormity of it struck her. The red ruby heart was hard, solid beneath her hand, as she opened the catch and pinned it to her dress. The pin cut her finger and it bled lightly.

Immediately, she stuck the finger in her mouth. It struck her as so odd, that it should have begun with blood -- a child's blood, cut by the strings of a violin -- and ended with her own. Marguerite was gone from the world, as so many of them had gone. But Marguerite she had raised and taught and protected, for her own sake, as well as LaCroix's. And a mortal hand had taken that from them, because she wasn't there. Because Nicola had been elsewhere, playing his games, defying LaCroix.

Slamming the lid shut on the box, she decided that she'd break that mortal hand, if she had to bleed Paris dry to find it. And that Nicola would pay for his inattention, in due time.

Chapter Nine

"So, she died?"

Janette nodded, then caught Alma's arm as she slid from the stool. "Where are you going?"

"He might still be waiting and --" Her eyes widened, as Janette frowned. "You're not *done* yet?"

"Sit!" Janette released Alma and pointed to the stool. "You've made me tell this. You'll hear it all."

"But, she *died*!" Alma stressed the word, as Janette raised her hand to get the bartender's attention. "That's what happens to mortals -- they die. That's right, isn't it?"

"Ah, but there are so many ways to die, Alma. So many ways..."

Chapter Ten

Janette removed her black veil as she entered the flat, then fell to the couch. "Mourning is so wearying," she announced.

"It becomes you." LaCroix closed the door behind her. He stood there, for a moment, eyes searching the room, then headed toward the table near the window, where the violin case rested. There was no hurry in him as he walked toward it, just as they hadn't hurried from Dublin. Bodies littered the rail stations and ferry routes in their wake, but few would ever be found. And the blood had been such a comfort, in its own way.

She watched him open the case, then lift the violin. The bow was in his hands and he placed the violin beneath his chin, as if preparing to play. Closing her eyes, she slumped back against the cushions, dreading the first sounds, for she knew what music he'd choose.

But there was no sound. When she opened her eyes, he was standing before the fireplace. Fearful, she looked to the table, but the violin was still there. It was somehow important to her that he hadn't destroyed it.

There was more silence between them. "I've heard from Nicola," she announced.

LaCroix shrugged. "And?"

"He's besotted with a mortal. That *dancer*. He calls her an 'angel.'"

"Little good can come from it." Leaning forward, he took the poker from the fireplace and stirred the dead coals. "He's done nothing about her, I suppose."

"Only moon after her, like a lovesick puppy. It's so like him, to idolize a mortal." The words slipped from her lips before she thought. When LaCroix turned to glare at her, she fell back against the cushions, a chill stealing through her. At least Nicola was honest in his passions.

Silence fell again. "She could have been the best," LaCroix said, still staring at the gray coals. "Not yet, but in a decade, perhaps five years more... she had that potential."

"If she lived even that long," sighed Janette. When he glanced at her, she shook her head. "No -- she had no illness, so don't look at me like that. I took good care of her. It was her heart that endangered her."

"Her... heart?" His eyebrow lifted in question. "You said she had no illness."

"I spoke in haste. She was consumed by an illness more fatal than any known to mortal kind -- she loved you." When he merely stared, she rose from the couch, hissing in disgust. "You *didn't* know, did you? I thought not. Mortal or vampire, you're all the same -- take what you want and leave us to lie in the dust."

His laughter made her turn. "Ah, Janette, you lie so prettily -- I could almost believe you."

"Then believe this!" Stalking toward him, she pointed her finger. "All Marguerite did, she did for you. When it appeared she couldn't play in the orchestra, her heart would have broken because she'd failed *you*. She even asked me if *I* would bring her across."

LaCroix grabbed her arm at the elbow, suspicious. "And, you said –?"

"That it was more than my life was worth." Wrenching her hand away, Janette turned her back on him. "I've won our bet, LaCroix... Marguerite never played in the symphony. You made two mistakes in this venture; you chose a mortal *woman* and you were kind to a mortal heart. The first could be overcome, but only through *her* talent, not through any device of your own. The second – never!"

There was not far to move – his hands were on her shoulders before her heart could beat. But a crash from the window surprised them both.

Amidst the broken glass, stood Marguerite. She stared at them with wild eyes, the white dress in which she'd been buried bloodied, muddied, and torn. Her feet were bare. And when she threw back her head and laughed, her eyes were gold and green, her fangs long, and white, and newly sharp.

"Liar!"

The hands at Janette's shoulders threw her roughly into the wall. Janette raised her arm quickly enough to protect her face, then felt the forearm snap as it absorbed the brunt of the impact. Before she could do more than turn, LaCroix was on her again, lifting her to her feet by her hair.

Janette raised her good arm to grab his, taking the pressure from her scalp. LaCroix pulled her close in a mockery of an embrace, squeezing her tighter when she let out a sharp cry of pain, the broken arm caught between them. "You said you didn't turn her," he hissed. "And is this what you feared to leave, that night by the Seine? It was all pretense in Dublin – play-acting! You knew she was dead *before* we left!"

"No!" she cried, trying now to push him away with her hand. "I didn't lie! I didn't know!"

There were other arms around her shoulders, pulling her back and away. LaCroix released her, and she huddled in Marguerite's embrace, which still smelled uncomfortably like the grave from which she'd clawed her freedom. LaCroix's anger had gone further this night than she'd seen in half a century. If Nicola had been present, she might have had a chance, *they* might have had a chance...

But Marguerite set her gently on a chair, then stood to face LaCroix. "It was not... Janette," she said, then coughed. Her lungs had not grown used to not breathing – she had still to learn the proper way to speak as a vampire and her voice was thin and wispy, like a cry on the wind. "She wouldn't. So I... found... someone else."

The glow was fading from LaCroix's eyes. He looked past Marguerite, to where Janette sat huddled in the chair. "If this is true, I owe you an apology."

In his eyes, in his voice, in his heart, she saw no sorrow for what he'd done. Janette merely hissed at him and clutched her broken arm to her chest. She whispered, "Run, little sister! Fly! Fly, *now*!"

But Marguerite ignored her. And, as LaCroix smiled, she knew there was nothing she could do, but watch. And remember. She'd always remember.

Gesturing imperiously across the room, at the violin, LaCroix spoke one word, "Play."

Foolish girl that she was, Marguerite smiled in answer, thinking to please him. Janette's heart cried within her as Marguerite walked to the window. Her bare feet were cut by the shards of glass, but the girl seemed not to notice. Lifting the violin from the table, she was still confident. The wood was tucked beneath her chin, the bow raised --

The notes were far from sour, but the life had left them. Marguerite played, one bar, then ten, then twenty, her eyes opening at the first sounds, then narrowing in anger and confusion, as the music eluded her. She stopped, the violin dropping from her chin. "What --?" she asked LaCroix.

His smile was still in place. "Play!" he commanded, in a more forceful tone than he'd ever used with her before.

Marguerite stared down at Janette, then raised the violin, trained to obey that command, in that voice. Again, the bow soared across the strings and the notes sounded. Marguerite's eyes grew wider with each stroke. Tiny beads of blood gathered at the corner of her eyes as she drew the bow faster and faster, speeding through the song, looking for some answer to her dilemma. Her heart knew what her head would not accept -- that the music had fled. The bloody tears that trailed her cheeks fell to the sounding board, then were struck away by the furious rhythm of the bow.

It was a mercy when she stopped, falling to her knees among the window shards, the violin and bow dropping to the floor as she covered her face with her hands and wept.

Only then did LaCroix cross the room. He retrieved the violin and the bow as he passed, then leaned down to take Marguerite's hand. Raising her to her feet, he kept the space between them, showing her the violin in his hands. "Now you know," he said, his voice soft, but backed with steel. "Now you know why you were so important to me. All the time, all the expense... even to the involvement of Janette in my plans. Now you understand *why*. You do, don't you? It's important that you do."

"The music." Marguerite stared down at the violin, horrified. "It's taken my music."

"No. It's taken *my* music. *You've* taken my music."

Janette wanted to close her eyes, but couldn't. For in Marguerite's confused gaze, there flickered the beginning of understanding. And terror. "But... you *loved* me."

The soft smile that lit LaCroix's face was almost gentle. "Ah, no, you silly fool. I never loved *you*. I loved the music. Only that, and nothing more." Staring down at the violin in his hands, he shook his head sadly. "And what shall I do about it?"

The bow was first -- he smashed it on the table, the hair springing outward as the stick was snapped in two. The violin made no less resounding a smash, bits of the sounding board flying into fragments, until only the fingerboard and bridge remained in his hand.

Marguerite's mouth was still formed into a circle of surprise, as he thrust forward with the fingerboard, stabbing the long wood piece through her heart. The hair from the bow he wrapped around either fist, spinning her and using it as a garrote around her neck, pulling until the spine was broken and her head lolled awkwardly, at an angle. He pulled for a moment even beyond that, so that the string cut further into the neck, drawing a thin line of blood, which sprayed upon his hands and jacket.

Her body fell to the floor at his feet. Untwisting the bow hair from his fingers, LaCroix looked up at Janette, smiling. "*Now*, she's dead." He held out his hand to her. "It's time we left. I'll send someone round to clean it up, later."

There was no hesitation. Janette took his hand, allowing him to help her to her feet. Already, her arm had begun to heal, she could feel the bone knitting into place. But she'd need blood...

At that thought, she turned her head, her eyes falling to Marguerite's corpse, which had already begun to decay.

"Yes – I'd forgotten our wager. And she's no good to you now." LaCroix touched his fingers to his lips, his hands spattered with Marguerite's blood. "I'll deliver what I promised, a musician of comparable talent, although that may take me some time. We never specified male or female. Does it matter?"

When Janette turned blank eyes to him, he softened his gaze. "You're angry with me. But I've apologized, properly. And... I'll give you a gift, as well."

Leaving her, he walked back to Marguerite's corpse. He squatted by the body and touched the head, ripping the small ruby earrings from each of the lobes. With the grin of a clever schoolboy, he held them out to Janette. "There. You've done well this time. You've gotten back your earrings *and* the ruby brooch."

When she didn't take them at first, he pressed them into the palm of her hand, closing her fingers over them. They were cold from the grave, wet from the bits of flesh and blood that clung to them. Then LaCroix placed his arm around her shoulder and led her to the door. "I've been thinking about Nicholas. Nasty business, this trafficking with mortals and ignoring us. He *belongs* with us. It would do him well to learn his lesson, once and for all –"

Epilogue

"LaCroix took his revenge on Nicola. And I helped, in my way. I no longer cared. As I said when I began, LaCroix was always very good at finding ways to occupy his time. And mine." Janette upended the glass, then licked her lips afterward. She stared at the empty glass in her hand, then placed it carefully on the bar. "I think I've had enough."

"More than enough."

Janette looked at Alma and, for a second, thought she saw something more behind those wide eyes than the usual vacant stare. Then she shook her head and twisted on the bar stool, looking over the club again. Such a thing would be impossible. They were only talking about blood, after all. Only blood.

"How many times have you worn the pin since then? And... the earrings?"

Annoyed, Janette touched the pin, then opened the clasp, taking it from her dress. "Once. Or twice. Never when I knew that LaCroix would see." The rubies were dull in the shadows, until she tilted the pin, catching the wisps of light from the dance floor again. Then, they blinded her. "Or Nicola – although he'd never know why. I was *so* angry with him. But I needed someone to blame, other than myself. There was only LaCroix, Marguerite, and I. And they are gone." She looked back at Alma, then found the blonde vampire standing beside her. "That was the moral, I suppose. Be kind to mortals, but not *too* kind. It's too easy for them to mistake kindness for love. And that cannot end well."

"Do you think... *could* he have loved her?"

Again, she stared at Alma. "LaCroix loved *nothing*."

"You've sworn that *you* love nothing --"

"Perhaps. Except the blood. I am *fond* of this club. And of Nicola. And of you -- *some* of you," she corrected quickly. "But love?" Janette shrugged her shoulders, staring out over the dance floor. "There are some who say *we* cannot truly love."

"But you loved Marguerite."

She never moved her eyes, or her head. It was not a question. There was no answer required. And even then, what one could she give?

Janette held her palm open, the red ruby heart at the center. "Take it."

"But you said --?"

"Take it!" she hissed. Then she reached up to her right ear. "*And* these."

Alma caught her hand before she could remove the earrings. Twisting her fingers with Janette's over the ruby heart, she said, "This is enough. I couldn't take those -- there's too much blood on them." Untangling her fingers, Alma carefully pinned the ruby heart to the front of her dress, tossing aside the tiny cupid ornament from the drink. She played with the lace for a moment, covering the decollatage of the dress, then turned to Janette for inspection. "Better?"

"Yes." Janette smiled softly, somehow feeling that Alma's question referred to more than the modesty of the moment. "Much better."

"Good." Her finger traced the outline of the heart, against the lace. "LaCroix and Marguerite and you... and I. And we're still here."

"For the moment." Janette pointed toward the doorway, where the bouncer was arguing with a young man, who'd pushed further into the club than he should have gotten. "Is *that* the one?"

Alma's face lit in recognition and she smiled, golden sparkles rising in her eyes. "Yes. That's him."

"Then you'd better go. After all, he's only mortal. You mustn't make him wait *too* long." When Alma hesitated, Janette nodded solemnly. "Go ahead, little sister. Have your fun, while you can. And take care not to lose your heart."

With a shy smile -- something Janette was certain Alma would never have managed on her own -- Alma headed toward the door, slipping past the dancers, before her beau of the moment could be ejected. Janette watched as the bouncer stepped aside. Words passed between the male mortal and female vampire, but seconds later they were dancing together, all smiles, beneath the red and white hearts and cupids that Alma had insisted decorate the Raven on Valentine's Day.

Janette turned back to her empty glass at the bar, only to find it full. The bartender nodded toward her from the other end, in between serving customers. She matched the gesture, then reached for a cigarette. Her hand no longer shook, as she set the lighter to the end.

The smoke curled upward, gray against the darkness of the shadows. With a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other, Janette walked across to the dance floor. And, eyes half-closed, she danced not to the throbbing rhythm of the latest trendy band, but to the memory of the pure, sweet sound of a solo violin, echoing in an empty hall.

– The End –

About the Authors and Staff

Teleri Beaty (vxurnm01@reading.ac.uk) prefers writing fanfic to bios. She says: "I hunt the little snippets in the posts about the episodes so that I know what to write the fanfic about, because we don't get the show over here!! [in England] I love dogs, cooking, traveling and martial arts... and writing, of course! (stage whisper: What else do you want to know?)"

Susan M. Garrett (susang2522@aol.com) Let's face it, Susan's fascination with literary vampires has become a lifelong pursuit, but it does have its limits ("I'd rather *see* one than *be* one."). She's the Assistant Director of MIS for the Township of Dover, alumnus of the University of Dallas, active participant in fannish consumer advocacy, a writer and editor, and a founding member of the Cult of the Black Aura. Susan generally plays well with others, her penmanship shouldn't be spoken of in polite society, and she's currently being treated for her addiction to being photographed with Disney characters and Universal monsters.

Marian Gibbons (starbase5640@genie.geis.com) is a member of SFFWA (by the skin of her teeth). She recently completed a vampire novel in collaboration with Karin Welss, titled ***In a Mirror, Darkly***. One of Marian's ambitions is to become a bestselling author. She's had many jobs in her life, but the same husband for the last nineteen years, the same dog for the last nine years, and the same house for the last seven years, in Santa Rosa, California.

Sandra Gray (tmp_harkins@dirac.physics.jmu.edu), in addition to "fan" fiction, writes (and hopes to publish) original science fiction and horror stories. Her other interests include art, costuming, and role-playing games. Currently a homemaker, she lives in Harrisonburg, Virginia with her husband Bruce and daughter Amanda.

Valery King (kingv@ccmail.orst.edu, kingv@ucs.orst.edu), having achieved her ambitions of going to Disneyland, buying a PC, and getting a satellite dish, is very happy to have new episodes of *Forever Knight* because otherwise she'd have nothing left to live for. Besides indulging her passion for correcting other people's spelling and grammar, she sings in the community choir and acts in several local theater groups, cares for a very old black-and-white cat and a very obnoxious young Siamese, and pays for everything by working as a cataloger at the Oregon State University library.

Lizbeth Marcs (lizbeth258@aol.com) is 25, lives in Milford, New Hampshire and works as a regional news correspondent for *The Union Leader*, a newspaper based in Manchester. When asked why she decided to become a reporter, she tells the truth: "'Cause I don't know how to add. Got a calculator?" She writes fiction in her spare time because sometimes it's nice to write a story with no basis in fact whatsoever.

Margaret Newman (margaret@cs.arizona.edu) was born in Taos, NM. She has lived in Tucson AZ most of her life. She states that her age is "somewhere between 30 and death." A certified chocoholic, Margaret loves to nosh on bon-bons while watching her favorite horror, sci-fi, and adventure movies. She also enjoys reading excessive numbers of romance novels (pant, pant). Occasionally, she'll cross over to other genres and read science fiction, fantasy, and adventure. Margaret, whose favorite color is blue, has two dogs (one of whom is related to LaCroix) and a cat. When Margaret grows up, she says she wants to be a famous author or country-western singer.

Rebecca Rauscher (realreb@aol.com, realreb@delphi.com) graduated in May from Miami University in Systems Analysis (that's where she wrote the story). Now she live in Cincinnati, works as a Systems Analyst/Programmer for the Andrew Jergens company (who make soap and lotion), plays racquetball and loves to read FK fiction in her spare time. This story is the only fanfic she's ever written.

Barbara Reid (barbara_reid@blyth.com) is a perky brunette who likes to go around dressing like Janette and Alma. Her hobbies range from watching the new Forever Knight season twice a week, to taking her own stereo 3D photographs, gardening and making dried flower wreaths, to investigating multimedia applications. This year for Halloween Barb plans on carving pumpkins that look like Lacroix.

Pamela Rush (PKRUSH01@UKCC.UKY.EDU) is currently indentured to a library in central Kentucky but she is contemplating a new career as a short-order souvlaki chef. Her most brilliant fiction is written entirely during TV commercial breaks. Her motto is "fulsome praise modestly accepted and criticism cheerfully ignored."

Karin Welss (kwelss@us.oracle.com) works as a senior technical writer in the software industry. She is currently collaborating with Marian Gibbons on a trilogy of vampires novels set in an original universe. The first novel in the trilogy, ***In a Mirror, Darkly,*** is currently making the rounds of the New York literary agencies, and Karin hopes to someday soon retire from software documentation to write historical fiction and fantasy full time.